



LOOT AND LOYALTY

This novel is set in seventeenth-century Poland and Russia and the central character is a Scottish mercenary, Captain Tobias Hume. The Author involves him in the training of Dmitri, a peasant boy from the Pripet Marshes who was to become known as "the second false Dmitri". The central theme of the novel rests on the relationship of three characters: Tobias Hume, Dmitri and his mother. Others appearing in the course of their story are the Polonised Scot Seton-Setonski, the boyar Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin, Scottish soldiers and pedlars, Polish nobles and peasants.

Tobias Hume was a real person, a mercenary soldier, a musician who played the *viol da gamba*, an inventor who dreamt of new instruments of war. In this book he constructs his Great Machine amidst the vapours of the Pripet Marshes. All that remains of him today are two books of musical compositions, published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and a petition to Parliament, quoted at the end of this novel as an epilogue.

The author has imagined a career for Tobias Hume which is not only typical of the seventeenth century but seems strangely relevant to our times. His problem is, in fact, that of a displaced person in reverse: an exile Scotsman in Eastern Europe.

Books by
JERZY PIETRKIEWICZ

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**THE KNOTTED CORD
LOOT AND LOYALTY**

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by

JERZY PIETRKIEWICZ



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CHAPTER I

Loot

CAPTAIN TOBIAS HUME was a mercenary who had, alas! mislaid his regiment among the débris of war, somewhere in Russia. Now he sat alone on a yellowish tuft of grass, amidst the foul vapours of the Pripet Marshes, and pondered on the fate of ninety Scotsmen, his hands resting on a viol da gamba, his weary eyes fixed on a crack in his left boot. Ninety soldiers, even if they were still alive, could hardly be called a regiment, but adding two carts to each man, carts loaded with sable furs, ermine, wax, golden candlesticks, tallow and brass kettles—these ninety guardians of loot represented a military strength worthy of Captain Hume's reputation.

He shifted his leg, and the crack split further: the left boot yawned towards its master, and the master yawned towards his instrument. The viol da gamba had two strings missing, but the sun still played on it, leaving the deeper tones to the care of creeping shadows. The birch trees paraded in a black-and-white file along a bog from which the frogs sent their raucous commands.

The Captain rose, adjusted his rapier, and followed the line of trees, dragging the instrument across the putrid grass. He did not think of the strings, but of the strips of paper hidden inside the box. For their sake he had saved the viol da gamba, for the sake of the Great Machine.

A cross loomed before him, tall as a birch tree, and patches of white and black jostled about its arms. Long pieces of embroidered cloth fluttered against a blue hole in

the sky, extending the gestures of the wooden arms. A man in white was balancing his feet half-way up the cross, his hands lifted to the fluttering cloth.

"Wind the towel twice round, my son!" a voice came from under the cross, and Tobias Hume caught sight of a wide kerchief falling on to the broad shoulders of a female figure. Her head was at the level of two sandals perched on an invisible prop: their twisted straps seemed to merge with the black stitches on the kerchief.

The man did not answer, his forehead pressed against the wood while his hands groped in the air. The ends of the cloth looked now like loose sleeves on an armless body.

"Hey, you, peasant!" shouted Tobias, claspings the hilt of his rapier. "Come down!"

The woman turned round and stared with her pale, large eyes. The legs above her head jerked for a moment, but the man had no intention of obeying the order, for his right hand moved along the edges of the linen, as if to quieten the disturbed air. The woman stepped back and said without looking at her son:

"They have already come to fetch you, Dmitri, my little falcon, they have come to bleed the great sky for your spotless towels, and you wanted only to wipe the wounds of the sun."

"How many are they, mother?" the man asked from the cross, clinging to the wood with his whole body. His voice almost sang the question like a prayer and ended in a deep sigh.

"Only one, Dmitri, only one, but he has so much dust on his foreign hat that a thousand hoofs must have beaten the sand of a hundred roads to bring him here before the wind. Ten armies will follow him, my son, and the sky will bleed on the Christ-towels of every cross."

"Does he ride a white steed, mother?"

"No, Dmitri, he has no horse, but I think he is a mighty general, because he wears a red jerkin and carries a fat wooden weapon. You'd better come down, son."

The woman was talking about the Captain as if he were not there. Tobias listened so patiently that he astounded himself; he no longer cared whether the peasant came down, neither did he want to talk with the woman. There was a smell of fresh milk in the air, and he smacked his lips. If he had had more strength, he would have mounted the hillock behind the cross and seen for himself the village at which he had finally arrived. Instead he sat down a few steps away from the woman, and in an undignified manner scratched his moist hair under his hat. "They have food," he thought, "that is enough. Should I sleep first or eat?"

Two wild eyes attacked the Captain from above; they peered at him from a safe distance, through the shimmer of hazy light. The man seemed to hang from one arm of the cross, his body contracted and his legs bent before a jump. With his head pushed forward the boy revealed his features in the mirror of the sun, and two grains of light settled on the big warts on his face, one over his upper lip, the other under his right eye. The mop of reddish hair attracted the Captain's attention, for it was like his own, and recalled the colour of rotting weeds through which he had waded after the loss of his gelding on the other side of the Dnieper. The wild eyes abused the stranger before the words began to disfigure the heavy, shapeless mouth.

"Foreigner," Dmitri said, bending his legs lower, "I am nobody's serf. We have no master here . . . Sir," he added, looking at the glitter on the rapier's hilt. "My mother came to this elk land from beyond the sunset, and my father, holy be his memory!" the boy quickly kissed the wood of the

cross, "my father fled here from over the great river." As he said this, he swung his right leg towards the east where the birches kept their watch by the bog. "You can't take me back to his lord in the country of the Tsar beyond the river." His leg swung out again.

"His Imperial Majesty, Dmitri, Tsar of Muscovy is dead," Tobias muttered sleepily to himself, and in his mind the loaded carts rattled over the memory of battles and escape, trampling his pride and anger.

"I can read and write, foreigner, yes, I can," the singing voice proclaimed under the signals of the embroidered towels, and these signals, too, were irrelevant.

"Get down, man," Tobias whispered, trying to raise his body, but his elbow slipped along the grass and banged against the viol da gamba: something crackled inside the box.

"I am hungry. Do you want me to kill your cow with my sword?"

"The cow!" cried the woman, and gathering her long skirt ran up the hillock, halted, looked back at the towels hanging from the cross, and plunged into the osiers, her kerchief spread wide like a stork's wing.

The boy jumped down and bowed before the Captain, pointing at his instrument.

"Shall I carry your big weapon, sir?"

"You'd better carry me," said Tobias.

The Captain was not forced to thrust his rapier into the cow's neck: he ate a duck instead, and after drinking some mawkish liquid that tasted of whey, he fell asleep by a hay-rick. As the stack was placed on poles above the ground, he had shoved his instrument under it and entrusted the future of the Great Machine to the fragrant vigilance of hay.

A lowing sound woke him up. Before he could push his

hat off his sweating face, someone pulled his boot and once more he heard an ominous crack.

"General," a woman's voice cried, "your soldiers have stolen my cow."

Tobias Hume scrambled to his feet and blinked at the sun now nesting on a beehive between two branches of the oak tree which cast a heavy shadow on a puddle and the ducks in it.

"He ran after them in great anger, the little falcon, and they will butcher my Dmitri, just as he dreamt on Saint Stanislas' Day."

"Have they brought any carts with them?" Tobias shouted impatiently, and hesitated in which direction to go.

"No carts, General, no carts." Her pale eyes stared hard at him, almost through his head, as if it were made of clear ice.

"Where are the men now?"

"They dragged the poor beast towards that hut where the other cross stands. But they were stupid to go there, yes, heedless and stupid, because the Christ-towels on that cross are drenched in the bile of the pestilent clouds."

On his hurried way to the hut Tobias passed the cow, or rather the animal passed him: with its tail raised up it ran, trailing a straw-rope over fern and moss. But no soldier followed the escaping booty.

The hut was made of logs loosely joined, and shouting and laughter fumed through its chinks and holes. Russian and Polish words rebounded from the walls with the voice of Dmitri chanting indignant protests. The Captain pushed his rapier through one of the holes and threw a booming order at the door:

"Come out, all of you!"

The muzzle of a musket appeared through another hole, and a drunken voice retorted from inside:

"Come in. We need a bear's skin to dress up our warty prince."

After this the door burst open and a hairy arm appeared, holding a jug. This was a friendlier counter-weapon, so the Captain withdrew his rapier and stepped forward. First he saw a naked chest, then a pair of yellow breeches; and as the arm with the jug came round his neck, a wet beard swished by the Captain's nose and he received a double kiss on both cheeks.

"Welcome to the coronation, brother soldier. Long live the Emperor! Cha-a-rge your pike!"

Hot breath poured down Tobias's face, the kissing lips mumbled on, and when the arm tightened its grip, sticky liquid began to trickle from the rim of the Captain's hat on to his steel collar. He could now no longer threaten with his rapier, which had dropped between the yellow breeches. Tobias's Hume tried to free himself by pushing the man into the hut with the whole weight of his body: a massive chest gave way, inhaling a brotherly cry of welcome, and the jug followed the arm in its shaky retreat, spouting the liquid generously.

Wherever the Russian fell, he certainly collapsed like a soldier, for two halberds dropped on him from somewhere, and lay full length across his body in unexpected homage. The Captain courteously bent and helped the man to get up. The Russian staggered to the other end of the hut, stumbling over a human obstacle, propped up against the wall like a sack.

"This is my uncle, Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin. He found the mead, and as soon as he tasted it his old body became stiff as a Turkish saddle."

"Is he dead?"

"Oh, no! But he missed the whole coronation for the second time. First in Moscow, and now here. . . . Look at this peasant! He told us he was Dmitri, so we made him the Emperor of frogs, vipers, hedgehogs and eels, which this accursed land breeds in abundance. He can read and write, he says. . . . Look!"

Tobias shaded his eyes from the sun which was forging vertical bars from the holes in the roof, and at once burst into laughter, delighting the Russian so much that he began to beat his chest with his fist. It was then that the Captain noticed another soldier squatting behind Dmitri. He introduced himself in the friendliest of squeaks:

"I am a Polish gentleman and you must be a German merchant. Can you sell me a pair of boots?"

The Captain ignored this suggestion, preferring to enjoy his laughter to the full. The peasant boy was changed beyond recognition. He sat on a dug-up stump, and his wild eyes clamoured his identity from the ghostly depth of his sockets. They had put a chasuble over his linen shirt, and tied his legs together with a crimson sash. Out of this mock splendour Dmitri's feet emerged, still wearing crude sandals, and the colour of the bark-soles and leather straps seemed to protest against the threads of gold piercing the lilies on the stiff robe.

The boy stared intently at his feet, as if to convince himself that the sandal straps would never let his body separate from his soul. With his eyes cast down he was less conscious of the royal adornment that had been placed on his head. But his hair must have objected to this intrusion, for its thick wisps sprouted through the ring of shining metal and mocked the crown, sticking up like tattered plumes.

The soldiers had obviously gulped a sufficient quantity of

mead to regard the Captain's arrival as part of the same game. When his laughter subsided, the hairy arm handed him a jug as naturally as if he were a substitute for the stiff boyar who was reclining against the wall.

At last Dmitri chose to speak:

"They made me drink," he said slowly, "and now I am as stupid as a ram." He tried to explain more, but he needed the help of a gesture, and no gesture could come from his hands: they were also bound, under the cover of the chasuble. Dmitri's shoulders jerked, he wetted his upper lip with his tongue and spoke again. This time he apologised directly to his conscience: "Oh, my poor soul," he whispered with a pious sigh, "I drowned you, I drowned you, and I shall now lie in the black mud as my father lies buried in that bog where the Horyn forest ends."

The boy bent his crowned head lower and closed his eyes. The two soldiers winked at Tobias and grinned. Their stupor had reached the summit of dull satisfaction. The Captain thought for a moment of Dmitri's mother, but he had no business to interfere, especially now when all laughter seemed dissipated. "The woman will soon come to fetch him, anyway," he set his mind at peace.

The Polish gentleman decided to show his full stature, and it did not make much of an impression. He unbent his legs with difficulty: they were bare to the knees with dried-up mud covering his feet like close-fitting shoes. He wore a brown garment which resembled a monk's habit cut off below the hips, and the only remains of his military dress was a richly studded belt with three daggers stuck behind it.

The Pole glanced at the musket, still thrust into a wide fissure between the loose logs, and this sight annoyed him greatly.

"Why did we drag this wretched barrel? No match, no

powder, nothing! What shal we fire with?—cow's dung or poppy seed?"

"I had two wagons of gunpowder . . ." Tobias muttered.

"You speak better Polish than either of these Muscovites. You are a German, I was right, wasn't I?" The bare-footed warrior eyed the Captain's hat with envy.

"No," answered Tobias and straightened himself up, "I am captain of a Scottish regiment in the service of His Imperial Majesty."

"A German, just as I said. But your Muscovite Majesty is no more. His own people butchered him, and we fought for their Tsar for nothing. In the end they stole our horses, our corselets, our women, even our boots and dirty shirts." The Pole's voice became angry and he stamped his foot, shedding clods of grey mud. "This stupid peasant here will sit on this rotten stump longer than the other did on his Russian throne. I tell you, sir, we should have burnt the whole of Moscow to ashes, and cut the throat of every traitor, and drowned every bearded priest, and . . ." he hesitated about what to add to the list of those missed opportunities. His companion hid his face in the jug and drank noisily. Only his slanted eyes derided the Polish ally.

The Captain felt that he had a more legitimate grudge against fate and spoke with great fervour:

"Gentlemen, it's the fault of your commanders. Once the Poles had decided to support the claim of the Tsar Dmitri, once they had brought him from Poland to Russia, they should have sent a stronger army, more musketeers and pikemen. And what did they give the poor wretch instead?"

The Russian answered from inside the empty jug:

"A Polish wife, a greedy . . ." The clay distorted the rest of his words into a jeering gurgle.

Tobias slapped his gorget and released the full voice of passion:

"You should have made the young Tsar grant special permission to professional men like myself, and we would have rounded up thousands of lazy peasants and turned them into foot-soldiers. With a well-manned regiment I alone, gentlemen, could keep not only a fortress, but a whole district under control. These Northern horsemen fight like Tartars, they have no knowledge of proper warfare. And their machines, those painted, shaky towers and double fences—what's the use of them? His Imperial Majesty would not even see my plans. . . ."

The two fugitives were not interested in the Captain's invention. Nor were they particularly keen on the subtleties of military tactics. They nodded gravely whenever Tobias raised his voice, and perhaps marvelled at his eloquence in a tongue that was not his own. Meanwhile the sun chequered the back of the hut and was tressing the black beard of Ivan Ivanovich, whose huge body pressed hard against the mossy logs, with no sign of life on his swollen face. Dmitri no longer sunbathed his bark-clad feet, for the afternoon shadows crept through the door and extinguished the crimson on the sash and the glitter at the edges of the chasuble. Only the throttling noises of his wide-open mouth were disturbing the shadows in their quiet obsequies of daylight.

Between the second and the third jug the Captain casually inquired about his lost Scotsmen, but the Pole obliged him compassionately with a story about his own servants, who had run away with their master's horses in such an ungrateful manner that, if the Lord God granted the pleasure of punishment, he would have those cowardly legs severed with a blunt axe to make the teaching of duties more effective.

Mead warmed the Captain's blood better than the June sun, but the harsh music of snoring imparted melancholy to his soul, and the soul in turn plucked his lips: they began to shape slow, incoherent words in which a soldier's fortune was deplored, the climate of the marshes cursed, and the riches of the foreign lands sold to the Devil for nothing.

Indifferent though they were to the military experience of the mercenary Captain, the stray soldiers supported his arguments about the dubious value of booty, and offered some relevant examples, the last of which, strangely enough, could still be studied on the peasant's head.

"This crown," said the Pole, "we found on one of those pagan saints the Muscovites load with gold and silver. You see, Captain, I am a pious man, and would never plunder Catholic churches. This I left to these two misguided heretic, who persuaded me, no doubt on the Devil's advice, to follow them to the South. They said they had their property near Starodub, and there, they said, I could rest and wait with my servants till the trouble ended. . . ."

The Russian protested, whether about the escape route or the robbed crown the Captain could not make out: he spoke quickly and gobbled his words. This, however, Tobias heard distinctly:

"My uncle, well . . . as soon as he entered his manor, my poor uncle cried out: 'The Tsar!' and ran out into the courtyard. He swore he had seen the ghost of the butchered Tsar and would not stay an hour in his house for fear of treachery, but set off with us to his cousin in the Marshes. . . ."

"The cousin!" exploded the Pole, "I haven't seen his cousin yet! But I saw you, heretics, chasing a poor priest, our priest!—out of his church. You took his wine and his chasuble, and his cantor too, because your fat hog of an uncle said he was fond of singing. And the cantor, Captain,

could not bear to see the chasuble in the hands of a drunken Muscovite; he sneaked out the first night we stopped at an inn, and was found in a thicket with his belly gored by a boar's tusk."

"Sir, listen to this belching Jesuit!" shouted the Russian in exasperation, too weary to start a fight. "The very same morning he was searching like a sniffing weasel for a monastery with our holy Russian crosses on the cupolas. He found one, with no monk inside, because they had all fled when the first Poles came with the Tsar. Yes, he broke into the chapel and snatched this crown from the head of a saint. He couldn't take more, the peasants chased him out."

"Captain listen"—the Pole grasped him by the belt—"these Muscovites cheat even their idols. When I wanted to sell the crown to a Jew on this side of the Dnieper, he told me that it was brass and worth less than a pair of German gloves. Why I kept it I don't know, perhaps I thought it might turn into gold with the change of the moon. They're all liars, every Muscovite is a liar. As for this fat hog," he pointed to the wall where the black beard seemed now woven of pure gold, "I don't believe he had a cousin in Poland. He wanted an excuse to hide in our country. . . ."

"You started the trouble, you! Why did you come with our young Tsar?" The Russian flung his empty jug to the wooden floor and it broke, startling Dmitri on his royal stump. The boy moved violently but did not interrupt his sleep. At this moment his mother peered through the door and, seeing the tilted crown and the robe, knelt in the grass without daring to look closer at the face.

"Oh, holy Virgin," she chanted, moving back on her knees, "the living person of the King from Cracow has come to pray under the Christ-towels in our miserable land."

Before Tobias Hume could wake up the boy, his mother

rose and took to her heels. Her kerchief swayed in the sun and faded into the white cluster of birches.

The soldiers burst out laughing, and soon the quarrel between the two allies was diluted in more mead. The thick earthen jugs restored confidence to arms and legs. Interrupting one another, they talked loudly about the calamities of this luckless year 1606, not fit to be called the year of Our Lord, but rather the beginning of Satan's rule, with thieves and treacherous servants appointed for each of hell's flaming hours. They described in gruesome detail how the new young Tsar had been attacked at night by the Muscovites in his Imperial castle, how he had jumped from the window and broken his limbs, how his guards had left him at the mercy of the rebels. The Pole recalled the sudden outbreak of frost after the Tsar's death. "Frost in May!" he shouted, bulging his eyes at the Captain.

Tobias Hume listened well and asked questions, for he had not been present at that time in Moscow.

"So we all ran like hares," the Russian concluded.

"I ran too, from my camp," Tobias added, and was surprised that shame did not tinge his ears with purple. Among his thoughts there lingered a frail hope that the ninety Scotsmen had not been so foolish as to defend themselves to the last man. And he longed for the distant echo of at least one cart, driven by one of the more practical angels of fortune—perhaps endowed also with some sense of direction.

"Water!" came a choking voice from the corner of the hut. It sounded as remote as if it had travelled from a battlefield in the scorched interior of Tsarless Muscovy.

The yellow breeches flashed out and in: the jug with muddy water was lowered to the level of the boyar's beard.

"He can't drink that. It might poison him," said the Captain.

The loving nephew hesitated, and when his uncle cried once more for water, he swung the jug back and forth: the boyar's face was splashed all over, and the stiff features began to dissolve into a benign expression. Dmitri, too, reached the end of his drowsy voyage: he did not cry for drink, but uttered one word, a very clear word: "Mother." It seemed also to come from a distant battlefield, somewhere in the deserts of sleep.

The two pairs of awakened eyes stared at each other. Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin opened his mouth, then shut it with a crack of his jaws, and before he parted his lips again, a wide sign of the cross fell quickly on his body from his trembling hand.

"By the Holy Mother in high heaven. . . . He's come once more to torment my sinful soul. . . . Water! Water!"

This time the nephew did not rush out; he thought that a sip or two of mead would clear the uncle's throat as well as his glazed eyes. Nikitin twitched his stately nose when he inhaled the smell of drink and looked up at his nephew with reproach. He fixed his small dark eyes on Dmitri's lower wart and scratched his beard with his long dirty nails; the other wart kept disappearing under the boy's tongue, which he slipped out at quick intervals like a snake, to moisten his parched lips.

The boyar rubbed his eyes furtively, then he tried to get up, heaved, and collapsed again, stretching his legs wide apart.

"Do you want to stand up, uncle?" his nephew asked, bending.

"No," Nikitin replied and observed the boy, counting the warts again and again, both eyes blinking in rhythm with the movement of Dmitri's tongue. The fat Russian could not keep up this sort of pursuit for long. Slowly he

closed his eyelids and leant against the wall, silently praying for guidance.

Tobias Hume took pity on the confused thoughts under that wrinkled, low forehead and addressed Ivan Ivanovich in as amicable a tone as his Polish accent in Russian would permit:

"Your Highness, this is a peasant boy from a cottage near-by. I encountered him by chance on my arrival here this morning."

Nikitin did not open his eyes to look at the master of such civil manners. Instead he inclined his head to acknowledge the respectful address and asked, very carefully choosing his words:

"Honourable sir, would you be prepared to swear on my cross, if I had it round my neck—and as you can see, I haven't, for it was stolen when I slept in a serf's boat during our escape over the Dnieper river—would you be prepared, I repeat, to swear that this apparition sitting before me is now your property and has been your slave for the last two days and nights?"

"This precisely I cannot affirm, Your Highness," Tobias replied promptly.

"Aha, you see!" exclaimed Nikitin, opening his eyes and slapping his fat thighs. "I am full of grief and apprehension. He is not your slave."

"I am nobody's serf!" the boy cried out, and begged the Captain for help, with panic in his eyes. A glimpse of an idea crossed Tobias's mind. 'We'll see how the situation develops.' His thoughts were now turned towards some vague purpose.

The Pole ventured a light hearted approach to appease the boyar and described the whole masquerade from the point when Ivan Ivanovich had stiffened under the influence

of mead. This only shocked the Russian and he showed many signs of what must have been a turgid contempt for the brother Slav.

The nephew obliged with more cautious explanations, but they did not help either. In the end the peasant himself pleaded eloquently for his release, but he ruined his chances by one unfortunate digression. With an irrelevance bred of fear and mead, he told of the dream he had seen during his drunken sleep.

"I stood by the window in a strange castle made of fine wood. And I heard my name spoken many times and by many people, I heard it around me, below the window in the courtyard, and even up in the warm sky. I saw shining axes and tall pikes, and fires like the falling stars were about my body. It was warm but I shivered, there was brightness but I felt the blackest of nights in my eyes, many friends wept for me, yet I had no true friend. I was alone and motherless, and a pit full of reptiles stared at me from below the window. I jumped into that pit and felt pain in every limb of my body. And all—the castle, the night and the very heavens—became blood. I dreamt I was dead."

When he stopped, breathing deeply and tired by the memory of his nightmare, no one in the hut dared to look at him, not even the stoical Scot, Captain Tobias Hume. There hung in the misty twilight a foreboding of strange events to come.

Huddled in the corner by the untouched jug of mead, Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin crossed himself so often and in such a frenzy of cramped gestures that Doomsday bells might have been tolling in every wooden belfry over the vast expanse of the Pripet Marshes.

Then in hushed silence Tobias Hume approached the trembling boyar, lifted him up and led him like a giant

child out of the hut, into the meadow where the old cross guarded the black embroidery of human fear on its sacrificial towels.

"He is a mere peasant boy, I tell you." The Captain forgot to add the flattering phrase 'Your Highness'. "And he says he is free."

"There are no free peasants, you know very well yourself, foreigner."

"Apparently you can find a few left in the Polish Kingdom. In this desolated district, anyway."

"Foreigner, do you understand? The Tsar is not dead." Tears were rolling down the swollen face of the boyar.

"And he entered the body of this stupid peasant. . . ." The Captain laughed ironically.

"Why not?" Nikitin retorted. "If a man can change into a werewolf, why shouldn't the Tsar, who is the image of God on this faithless earth, why shouldn't the Tsar, I repeat, resurrect in the guise of a peasant, the lowest of all creatures that the Lord God furnished with an undying soul!"

"Well," the Captain's thoughts were no longer vague, "I'd better tell you, Your Highness, that the boy Dmitri asked me this morning, of his own free will, to be admitted to my service. I am a Captain, as you know, and I have the right to enlist men wherever I find them, free and willing."

"How much do you want for him, Captain?" the Russian whispered, bending to his ear.

"We'll talk about that later, Your Highness."

"He won't escape, will he, Captain?"

"Well, we can place a watch outside the hut."

"My nephew is at your command."

"I am obliged to you, Your Highness."

The boyar staggered back to the hut.

Dmitri's mother must have looked for her son in every cluster of osiers, in every birchen grove, for she appeared late at the hut when the moon had already sharpened the halberd of the boyar's nephew. He would not let her in. She had brought the cow with her and the viol da gamba for the Captain.

Tobias came out to fetch his instrument, and the woman said to him:

"If you have killed my little falcon, give me back his body. Here is the poor beast, still un milked, take it, butcher it, eat it, but give me back my boy Dmitri, by the five open wounds of Christ, give him back to me."

"He is safe, woman. You will see your son in the morning. Take your cow to the shed."

"Oh, my little falcon!"

"He's asleep, I tell you. Go home." And the Captain stepped behind the soldier on guard, dragging his viol da gamba over the moonlit moss.

Inside the hut Tobias found his precious merchandise alone under the wide and glimmering hole in the roof. The peasant stared at the sky. Silence separated them, as difficult to break as the silver grate of the moon over the hut's roof.

"I want to see my mother," Dmitri said in a sulky, childish voice, his fingers playing with the brass crown.

"You have no mother, my boy, no mother, you understand."

Silence fell again and filled every earthen jug with scentless poison. Outside, the creaking of wheels slowly began to outline the wooded limits of distance.

"The carts!" shouted the Captain and flung the door open. He ran past the cross, brushed his wide sleeves along the supple twigs, charging through the shrubwood, caring little whether the rotten leather of his boots could take this final

challenge. His heart danced a jig, faster and faster, until he heard the soft Scottish accents.

"I am your Captain," he called out towards the first wagon.

"We are not soldiers, we are merchants," a tired voice answered him under the crack of a whip. A horse neighed, shook its mane and seemed to nibble at the moonlight over the bumpy forest road.

"Do you carry furs and skins?" the Captain asked, running along the row of carts. He was not curious to learn about their trade, he merely wanted to hear his native speech addressed to him, for the pleasure of his ears only.

"Ay, we're lucky to have escaped with our own skins, Captain. The Tsar Dmitri is dead, but Saint Andrew bravely protected us, and we passed through the gates of that slaughter-house which the Devil chose to name Muscovy. And, Captain," the soft voice continued, "do you know the shortest way to the estate of the laird Seton-Sctonski?"

CHAPTER II

The Gifts of the Wise Men

"HE'S gone!" Tobias Hume bent over the bearded boyar, who was still snoring a hymn of praise to morning sleep, his hand brushing away the specks of light and the flies about his face. The dry shreds of the towels on the old cross dropped above the snoring man like the mutilated limbs of a misty monster, but they could no longer distract the hungry insects of the bogs, which had discovered the boyar's beard.

"He's gone!" repeated the Captain, bending lower, "Ivan Ivanovich, wake up!"

Nikitin smacked his thick lips, swallowed saliva, and throwing his whole arm against a swarm of flies spat out a curse:

"You mangy son of a bitch, how dare you shout at your master! I'll have you . . ." Then, opening his right eye, he recognised both the cross and the Captain, and relieved by this identification he yawned several times, revealing a yellow row of large teeth. The Russian was still too drowsy to take in the Captain's words.

"He stole my hat and my boots, the swine. . . . Look!" Tobias lifted his bare foot and let it slowly drop on to the ground. Again he felt the softness of moss sprinkled with dew, and its touch cooled his anger. Nor did he seem to care any more about the loss of his hat, for the fresh air was now bathing his hair, gentle as the dew on the moss. He must have smiled to himself, because the boyar suddenly stared at him in stupor and asked:

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"What boots, whose boots? Oh, these accursed flies!"

"He took them and ran away. Do you understand, he's gone!"

Now Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin appeared to understand. He began to tug at his beard, and each time his fingers grappled with the black tuft of his hair a mumbled apostrophe escaped from his mouth towards the outstretched arms of the cross:

"Oh, sweet Saint Nicholas . . . Oh, the wandering sun in the sky . . . Oh, my sinful eyes that have to see this cruel punishment . . . Oh, Captain, Captain . . ."

The last exclamation was followed by a violent gesture of both hands reaching for Tobias's bare feet, and this startled him as much as the mumbled litany of woes.

"No, no, Your Highness," the Captain rushed with an explanation. "Listen carefully, and try to keep calm. It's the Pole . . . that thin-legged heron who . . ."

"Oh, that scoundrel," Nikitin patted his beard and yawned again leisurely, as if to prolong the memory of sleep. "You didn't sell me the Pole, Captain. You sold me the boy Dmitri, body and soul, and his soul happens to be that of the Tsar. I am content, very content."

"Yes, we signed the agreement," confirmed Tobias, and as he tried to display before the boyar's imagination all the possible dangers which the Pole's escape might provoke, his slow phrases were collecting thoughts like dust, still floating over the embers of the previous night. They had read the full text of the agreement by the dying fire in the kitchen, an agreement of smudgy clauses written on the back of the four precious strips that held the plans of the Great Machine.

"That Pole could easily ruin everything," Tobias echoed his own doubts, but this time the thought was expressed in

a loud voice, and the boyar grasped its full meaning. He got up and leant against the cross, smoothing out his long robe, which was as trampled as the grass on which he had lain. Every crease on the embroidery belied its former splendour, and around the boyar's neck only a few wisps of fur clung to the memory of a rich collar. Ivan Ivanovich, the signatory of the solemn pact, at this moment resembled some moulting beast from a Muscovite forest which had strayed into a sunny clearing and stood ashamed before the scrutinising eye of summer. When he tried to comment on the Captain's remark, the whole helplessness of his physical appearance cried out through his words and gestures:

"Foreigner, had I but a couple of peasant horses, had I not lost that cross of mine! It was studded with rubies, Captain, yes, and its golden chain was so long that you could wind it thrice round your neck, yes, thrice, I am not lying. . . ."

"The Pole knows our secret," Tobias muttered, "and the Poles have long tongues, Your Highness, they prattle like market women. We'd better do something about the boy."

Nikitin sighed very deeply and said:

"I am very hungry. My belly rumbles like a cart. It always rumbles when I am mightily troubled. Let's go to that woman and eat. I must eat, I can't think on an empty stomach. You've saddened my weary soul, Captain. Why have you saddened it so much, foreigner?" The Russian looked at Tobias with reproach and scratched his black beard.

"I think we should allow the peasant to see his mother. After all, he has to eat too," said the Captain and stepped towards the hut.

Between the haystack and the cowshed the morning hours

staged an almost idyllic interlude. The instruments of war were abandoned: upright they rested against the hay and only the sheaths of light on the halberds kept a militant promise. The useless musket seemed to have concluded a truce with the Captain's viol da gamba, for they both lay on the chasuble between the thick props under the rick.

The two Russians, their moustaches still white with milk, observed the boy Dmitri in silence. He sat beside Tobias Hume in the entrance of the shed; behind them the woman milked the cow. The swishing tail and the squirting liquid beat parallel rhythms into the dim interior, accompanied by hollow echoes from the wooden pail and the buzzing of bees over the hole in the roof. The boy was busy with strips of bark and he grinned with satisfaction when his knife carved out a large sole. All the morning he had appeared quite unconcerned about his relation to the three strangers.

"Make nice shoes for the gentlemen, Dmitri, my little falcon, and they'll be sure to walk away in them. How can they leave us, poor travellers, with no shoes on? The General is a kind Christian soul, I know it, he will do you no harm, my boy."

Dmitri grinned in reply without turning his head. The Captain looked towards Ivan Ivanovich and their eyes met. The boyar's expression was as puzzled as before: his belly was now full, but his thoughts still empty. His nephew wore a peasant shirt over his yellow breeches and this new acquisition interested him more than Dmitri's fate. Staring stupidly at the skilful hands of the boy, he could only wonder whether the bark sandals would fit his large feet, and if the milk he had drunk would soothe the hangover which still held his head in a dull grip.

Dmitri's mother went on milking and talking; and the Captain felt that she was also praying during the short

intervals of silence, praying there behind his back for a word of mercy from him alone.

"The General," she said, still addressing her son, "the great General will find his army on one of those high roads in the North, as soon as he goes there he will find his great army. Surely he knows they wouldn't come here over the marshes, no army would come to this boggy spot, unless it were driven by the Devil himself."

Dmitri, holding a thin strap of leather between his teeth, muttered almost inaudibly:

"Mother, would you like me to bring you a strong horse, and a lot of holy pictures, and a warm fur cap for the winter?"

Before she could answer her son, Nikitin, who had been reverently avoiding Dmitri's eyes, rushed with a glittering gift of temptation:

"I saw twelve golden apostles in the vaults of the Imperial palace, they were as big as men, and all with eyes of sapphire, very noble eyes. . . . But we must get to Moscow first, yes, we must, before the ungodly thieves melt the statues and sell the gold to the Tartar infidels. Yes, we must hurry to Moscow to save the holy statues."

Dmitri stared at the Russian, and Ivan Ivanovich quickly bowed his head, while his entire body seemed to quiver, from fear or excitement.

"I can show you big cities and monasteries, I can show you the whole beautiful world beyond these marshes," Tobias said, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Yes, you can see it all. And I shall protect you as if I were your own father. No one will dare to touch you."

"No one," echoed the boyar from the yard and promptly crossed himself to secure a friendlier co-operation from the spiritual regions. So far, the soul of the Tsar rested in the

peasant's body without any desire for supernatural assistance.

This worried Nikitin the whole morning. To his great relief, however, the peasant tried to prove that he was not altogether a half-wit. He licked the wart over his upper lip and asked Tobias Hume:

"General, do you own many horses?"

"I shall soon have horses, wagons and gold." Saying this the Captain winked at the boyar, who acknowledged this timely reminder with a slow nod.

"A horse for me?" the boy whispered, disregarding his mother's sighs.

"The best horse," said the Captain.

"Two horses?" Dmitri's voice acquired enough authority to barter for his services, wherever they might lead after making three pairs of bark sandals.

"Two horses. You will have two horses."

"One for my mother," Dmitri added, to appease those anxious sighs inside the shed.

The first pair of sandals was ready. The woman finished milking her cow and passed between Dmitri and Tobias, carrying a large pail in her hand. She beckoned to her son and in silence entered the cottage. Drops of spilt milk had marked a trail for the obedient boy over the footprints of the three tempters. Dmitri rose and followed his mother.

While they were whispering inside, the men in the yard watched one another, straining their ears after sounds that might rebound against their suspicion. And soon they heard them, coming not from the cottage but from beyond the osiers, from the other side of the hillock where the cross stood, newly adorned by Dmitri's dutiful hands. As the echoes skidded softly over the thicket, to be muffled by the abundant grass, it was hard to guess whether one rider or a host of men was approaching the solitary cottage. Tobias

Hume leapt towards the hayrick, his hand on the rapier: now he stood between the two Russians, who had lowered the halberds, casting quick glances from the path by a heap of dung to the bushes around the oak tree. A horse neighed near-by, then another further away, it seemed, in the birch-grove hidden by the cottage. The boyar's nephew looked sideways at the Scotsman's blade and muttered through his moustache:

"They'll take us for his servants. Shame on us, uncle. No swords, no daggers."

Nikitin puffed and sweated, his eyes became two dark slits. A duck slithered over the shining surface of the puddle, quacked at the sight of the Captain's bare feet and waddled its way to the heap of dung. No sound came from inside the cottage. For all they knew, the peasant might have sneaked out with his mother. Ivan Ivanovich made a step forward as if to prevent the boy's escape, but a sudden rustle of bushes arrested his attention. All three turned to the left, and no sooner were the halberds reflected in the puddle than a rider, followed by another, tore through the entangled twigs, and both pulled up their horses just under the branch that held the beehive.

"Only two . . ." the boyar whispered into the Captain's ear and strode straight into the puddle.

Tobias had no time to admire Nikitin's resolution, for he was startled by three objects falling one after another to his bare feet. The first was his hat, and then his boots, one of which hit the edge of the water and splashed it up to the Captain's knees.

"Thank you, German, for lending me your wardrobe. I couldn't have paid my visit with nothing to cover my legs. And I needed a hat too for paying due respects to this most hospitable citizen of our illustrious Commonwealth. May I

present to you, German, the loyal subject of His Majesty King Sigismund—long and glorious be his reign—may I proudly present pan Seton-Setonski.”

Tobias was so taken aback that he hardly connected the name he had just heard with that mentioned the previous evening by the Scottish merchant: he gaped at the impudent Pole, now wearing a corselet and a tall round cap with plumes.

“Pan Seton-Setonski.” The name resounded once more amidst the buzzing of bees, and the man, twice introduced, inclined his head and let the reins fall along the horse’s neck. He was clad in white: his long linen tunic, gathered round his waist, covered the sturdy figure of an elderly man, more Polish than Scottish to look at, to judge by his dress and by the way his hair, close-cropped below, shot out in a grey bunch at the top of his square head.

While the two were dismounting, the Russians advanced slowly, grasping their halberds. The younger, however, thought fit to introduce his uncle.

“Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin, and I am his nephew Alexey Petrovich Rukin. We are no peasants, honourable sir, we lost all we had on our way here, and I am sure that you heard only lies about us from him who is not worthy of your honourable company.”

Nikitin nudged his nephew and mumbled quickly: “Better ask why they’re here.” Rukin ignored this. Taking off his cap again, Seton-Setonski extended his right hand to greet the boyar, but his first words were drowned by a loud cry from the Pole:

“Dmitri, come out, Dmitri!”

Nikitin needed no other explanation, he knew they had come to rob him of his precious find. He pulled the Captain by his sleeve and jumped to the door. The nephew was even

quicker to realise the change in the situation: he had already barred the entrance to the cottage, standing astride. All three formed a close rank: the yellow of Rukin's breeches and the red of Hume's jerkin proclaimed anger, while the steady glow of metal consumed the remains of patience. The peasant's head appeared behind his self-appointed defenders. With his mouth wide open he admired the plumed caps and the horses. His mother had crouched by the boy and was now peeping through the space enfolded by the yellow breeches.

The visitors did not intend to meet the challenge. On the contrary, they smiled, Seton-Setonski's face beaming with a benevolence appropriate to his station.

"Do not be afraid," he said, pronouncing each word carefully. His accent was heavy, yet the sentence he uttered sounded more authoritative because of it. "Do not be afraid," he repeated like an archangel pacifying the awe of mortals.

"I am a Scotsman, sir," Tobias ventured to introduce himself, but Seton-Setonski answered him in his slow Polish, as if to imply that angels always speak the language of the terrestrial region which they choose to honour by their visitation.

"I was told you were a German. Pan Miechowski?"—he turned his eyes to the Pole—"told me everything about you, sir, and your companions. I came to help you, and I see that you all need some help." Saying this, he surveyed the file of bare feet and smiled again at the sight of the frightened eyes over the threshold. "Is this woman the mother of the boy, pan Miechowski?"

"Yes, she is. But take a good look at his warts. Remember what I told you. You see now, I wasn't making it up. Exactly the same warts. Though, I must confess, to-day he

doesn't seem so much like the other. They frightened him, these Russian heretics, and his face has changed. We came in time, otherwise he might have lost his Imperial looks altogether."

Seton-Setonski listened attentively, lifted his cap to Dmitri and with dignified deliberation placed it back over his mop of grey hair. Then he clapped his hands, and after a while two servants, dressed in blue, appeared behind the dung-heap.

"Bring the coach here. And drive slowly, the back wheels are loose."

It must have required some imagination, as well as ignorance, to embark on such an embassy with a coach, but the marshes in summer are a land of surprises, and whatever number of times the wheels had wound upon themselves, their final effort on the way up to the cottage was to match the weird purpose of their journey. They turned wearily, carrying a square box supported by wide leather belts, and a touch of elegance was provided by the servants who took their places on both sides of the coach, one of them—alas—in the dung up to his ankles.

The boyar suspected the worst from the arrival of the coach. Resignedly he laid down his halberd, and Dmitri stepped over it like a victor. The boy made a sign to his mother. She got up, pushed aside the Captain's rapier and found herself face to face with Seton-Setonski, who, in height at least, was her equal. But whoever he was, he bore himself like a landlord, and a landlord, she knew, could trick a peasant out of his free property. She bowed down and embraced Setonski's legs round his knees. What else could she do—cry or curse? The memory of her youth in bondage branded her mind with one admonition: defy the noble by reminding him of his privilege to be inconsistent

even in greed and cruelty. But such a defiance might offend with words; a gesture was safer: sanctified by custom it could plead silently, in mute communion with enslaved dignity.

"Good woman, we have come with gifts for your son," said the landlord Seton-Setonski. She still clung to his knees. "Allow me to get them." She rose and looked round, staring at each man in the yard. They stared back at her. The Russian faces brightened at the mention of gifts, they shone even through the Polish word obscured by Setonski's pronunciation.

Only Tobias Hume realised that the chance of winning the boy back was slipping through his fingers: he quickly manœuvred his way to be near Dmitri. The peasant had his eyes fixed on the four horses harnessed to the slender carriage.

"General, four horses here," he chanted with pious reverence, "and two there, is six horses altogether."

"Yes, Dmitri, only six."

"Six! I've never seen six horses at the same time. If two of them were mine, that rich lord would still have four."

"Yes, Dmitri, four," said the Captain, and thought of those four strips of paper hidden so very slyly in his instrument. It was too painful to reflect on the value of the pact signed with the person whose riches were on the wrong side of the frontier. He had been outwitted by one wise man, maybe by two, but he certainly did not at that moment expect a third rival. The third, however, revealed himself as soon as Seton-Setonski ordered his servants to bring the gifts from the coach. All the time he had been there, in the gilded box, hearing their conversation and watching the same patch of sunny sky through the small window in the coach's roof. When Tobias saw him climb out with the help of both striplings, he sensed in this slight withered priest a

man armed with a keen intelligence. He was beyond doubt the wisest of the three.

"I greet you, gentlemen, in the name of my master, Jesus Christ."

His sudden appearance distracted everybody's attention from the clothes which the servants were taking out. The boyar shuddered and withdrew behind the back of his nephew: this cassock blackened all his premonitions, as if an envoy from the demons of death had walked into the yard to claim the soul of the young Tsar once more.

"I've been praying for the deliverance of your hapless land, noble lords," the priest said to the Russians, and Alexey Rukin mumbled something in reply, wondering whether he should again introduce his uncle and himself. Meanwhile Dmitri panted and trotted under the weight of velvet, silk, satin and leather: he held in his arms a purple cloak, a doublet, two sable caps, three belts, lace collars and gloves. Hot, blindfolded, and confused by the moaning of his mother, he handed the whole armful of gifts to the Captain; the Captain in turn pushed them back into the coach.

"I don't want to be dressed up and get drunk," the boy at last managed to protest. And seeing his mother by the side of the Captain, he pointed at the hayrick and said in a loud voice: "I only wanted a horse like one of those there, crunching our best hay. Only a horse, or two . . ."

The Pole Miechowski heard it well and seized his opportunity at once. He pulled his horse away from the stack and led it to Dmitri.

"Take it. There are three more horses on the road. Take it. It's yours."

"No, mine will be the one I'll get from this great General. He promised me many horses, you know. But this I must

leave with my mother. She always wanted to buy a horse. My father had one, but they both drowned, the horse and my father."

Dmitri talked on, and as his eloquence soared higher into a dream-like fancy, he made his mother weep, but hardly looked at her. When she knelt before him and wetted his hand with tears, the boy remembered his other promise.

"I'll bring you beautiful icons, mother. And golden statues too."

Here came a chance for the priest to offer his gift, and though it was much smaller than Miechowski's horse, it had a deeper significance, for Dmitri's mother as well as for Captain Tobias Hume. The priest gave the woman a rosary in which the larger beads were made of gold, and the cross was studded with rubies.

She took the rosary and kissed it, then she asked the Captain to kiss the bejewelled cross. He lowered his head and touched the central ruby with his lips. The woman said:

"I knew from the beginning that you would take my little falcon away from me. You tempted him first, and now you've kissed the cross, my cross. The Lord God only knows if your kiss too is that of Judas."

Three hours later the coach jostled over the dry clods of mud, from time to time disturbing Dmitri's sleep. He sat on the soft pile of his gifts and dreamt of white steeds nibbling at the embroidered edges of the Christ-towels.

On both sides of the shaky box, now drawn by one pair of horses only, rode two Russians, two Poles, and two Scotsmen, of whom one was a soldier of fortune and the other a loyal subject of King Sigismund. The Polonised Scot Seton-Setonski conversed with the priest; the Captain listened to pan Miechowski's soliloquy; the boyar neither

talked nor listened: he and his nephew shared similar thoughts, speculating on the nature of Polish hospitality.

"So we must first feed the peasant's memory," continued Miechowski, pleased with himself and his companion. "You know, Captain, I am glad you're not a German. The Germans rush things, and our plan requires great patience. I am very patient and have a good memory, so good, to tell the truth, that I could train a score of Dmitris. I am not boasting, ask pan Seton-Setonski. I repeated to him every word I heard from the Tsar Dmitri Ivanovich, and I heard much. The Tsar spoke to me often, not only when he entertained us Poles in Moscow, but even earlier, during all that fighting we did for him, sparing no blood or money; and without our sacrifice, as you well know, Captain, there would have been no Dmitri on the throne of Muscovy."

Tobias Hume had already heard what was worth hearing. Now it was his turn to guide the conversation, if he were to learn something about those dealings Miechowski had not even mentioned.

"Have you known Seton-Setonski a long time?" he asked suddenly.

"No, but I heard of him. Oh, yes, often. And I liked him, as it were, from hearsay. To tell the truth . . ." Miechowski was about to give an illustration of his excellent memory, but the Captain interrupted him in time:

"And you liked him even better when you met him early this morning."

"No, I met him earlier." The Pole would not deviate from the narrow path of truth. He wished to specify this 'earlier': "Captain, when I borrowed your boots and your hat, you were asleep. But it wasn't very late at night, Captain."

"Yet you had to walk miles and miles to get to his place."

"It's a splendid manor, Captain, and no man as tired as I was then could have walked that far."

"So you borrowed a horse too?"

"To tell the truth, I did."

"Where?" Tobias was genuinely impressed by Miechowski's guile.

"On the dark road in the forest. From a man who, judging by what I now know to be your mother-tongue, must have been your countryman."

"One of the poor merchants running away from Muscovy. . . ."

"I had to run away too. . . . And my purpose was of great importance."

"You mean the boy Dmitri."

"I speak of the future Tsar, Captain."

Tobias Hume felt more humiliated by this conversation than by the unfortunate course of events since his crossing of the Dnieper. Somehow he had to dislodge the sneering confidence from the soul of the man who had duped him and belittled him in the eyes of another Scotsman.

"Pan Miechowski, I think I was quicker than you." Tobias had never spoken Polish with such a precision of malice. "Pan Miechowski," he repeated the polite address, "last night I signed an important agreement with an important person. This agreement I carry with me to show to Seton-Setonski when we arrive."

All of a sudden Miechowski's voice became squeaky, and despite his corselet and splendid belt he seemed to be once again the man in rags who had drunk too much mead and blubbered about his ill luck.

"Captain," he yelped nervously, "you obtained no doubt some wild promises from Ivan Ivanovich and his nephew. All Muscovites are liars. Those two villains, whose treachery

I witnessed with my own eyes, those two would even sign an act of union with His Holiness the Pope, provided they could sell it later on for two barrels of aqua-vitæ. That agreement of yours, to tell the truth, is worth precisely nothing. Nikitin couldn't even trade it with a vagabond, with a Scottish pedlar, for instance."

The Captain dropped his right hand and it rested on the rapier's hilt. He hissed through his clenched teeth.

"Dmitri is only a peasant. I can easily remove that gilded stump from under his Imperial bottom."

"You can't, Captain. It's too late. You'd better make peace with me."

"Too late!" Tobias echoed with derision.

"I am not boasting," said Miechowski, regaining control over his voice. "I am not boasting about my foresight, but at this moment five messengers are nearing the Russian frontier. Their horses are fast, the best horses we could provide for them, and each of the five men carries golden coins. They will soon stand on Russian soil, but not for long. They are to cross the rivers along the frontier, and pay in gold for the crossing. Each ferryman will thank them on his knees for such royal payment. And royal it shall remain in the rumours that will spread from mouth to mouth. Captain, they will repeat all over Russia: 'Tsar Dmitri again escaped with his life to Poland. Before long he will be back in Moscow to punish the traitors. He himself said so to a humble ferryman, and paid him with golden coins.'"

Tobias Hume could not find a ready comment. His wit had failed him. Asleep in the coach a few yards away, Dmitri was already crossing the seventh river in his dream, the river which reflected the distant cities of nightmare.

CHAPTER III

‘Nos Habebit Humus’

DMITRI found himself in a situation not unlike that of a student sent to a newly-established college in which the tutors were still arguing about the scholarly subtleties of the curriculum. Pan Micchowski acted as senior tutor, but unfortunately he was so dogmatic about his method of teaching that neither the financial benefactor, Seton-Setonski, nor the three vagabond masters could furnish the student's mind with their own ideas.

The boy was left to his crude devices and he spent more time in the stables than in the spacious wooden manor or in the chapel where the priest, Father Stanislas, waited for the first signs of rustic piety: he waited in vain with his well-prepared lessons on theology, Latin and Jesuit diplomacy.

Dmitri taught himself how to adapt his agile body to the discomforts of fashionable dress. He would thrust his tough fingers into the circular patterns of the lace collars and simplify their design with one ferocious pull. Similarly he would test the strength of the satin on his doublet and tear its slashes each day a little further with artless curiosity as to whether the garment could take a week's trial. For the purple garters and sashes he also found a better use: he would admire them on the horses' tails while they swished and laughed with colours. In the end Seton-Setonski, whose generosity seemed boundless, suggested that the boy should wear the simpler and looser dress of his servants, for the time being at least. And the blue tunic turned out to be most becoming beneath Dmitri's sunburnt face. Whenever

his shoes pinched after running, he discarded them and watched the puppies sharpen their teeth on them in the courtyard. He asked for his bark sandals, and whoever had inherited them among Setonski's labourers was made to return them to their maker.

His curiosity did not tire, yet he saw fewer people about the manor house. Only the most trustworthy servants were admitted into the courtyard. The wagons of the Scottish merchants had departed the day after Dmitri's arrival, and, he remembered, he had not been allowed to walk among them or even to wave towards them from his window.

There was, however, always someone in the near distance watching him, ready to come when summoned but never willing to talk for long. He began to wonder about the two Russian guests, where they were and how they amused themselves: he knew they were staying in the manor itself, and once he heard a drunken song in Russian. As for the Captain, whom he finally deprived in his thoughts of general's rank, Dmitri could on occasions exchange a few words with him, but the foreigner was obviously busy, preparing himself for another war.

One morning—it must have been nearly a fortnight since he had left home, but he had lost the count of days—he spied out a swallow's nest high up in the stables and thought it would be clever to know exactly how many eggs the bird had laid. He climbed up a rotting ladder, then a crooked prop, and after screwing his hands through dense cobwebs he groped for a beam, grasped it and pulled himself up. Lying on the beam he could see not only the inside of the nest, which was empty, but also the fields outside, and they were not empty. People worked and carts crept like beetles among them. The chinks between the boards were too narrow: he could not squeeze his head in to observe better.

But his eyes were sharp and accustomed to the shades of moist colours in this land of bogs, woods and sandy mounds. Dmitri soon noticed that the birch groves here were scattered along the horizon, leaving much space for farming; instead of roadless greenery he saw yellow cornfields and rusty paths. There was a village tucked in the corner of this friendly landscape, with props of smoke upholding the supple sky.

He spotted only one cross between the stables and the village, and its solitary watch over the fields kindled his imagination. There was a fresh whitewashed cloud hanging just above the cross, yet no piece of cloth tended its weary arms.

Dmitri had at last found some task to perform. He climbed down, passed his bodyguard seated on a trough and came out into the shimmering cascades of hot air. He asked several women in the kitchen about linen towels, but the ones they showed him had no embroidery along the edges and could not bear any comparison with those woven by his mother. After ransacking two coffers in the hall, he chose a piece of embroidered cloth which Christ—he thought—might put up with, knowing that one day Dmitri's mother would bring a better offering. The next thing to do was to sneak out into the open fields without being seen by his shadow man. For this he had to wait till the afternoon, when a bull broke loose and, in the wisdom of its instinct, charged at Dmitri's bodyguard.

A jump to the gate, a screech from the latch, and the peasant was outside, on a road strewn with the shadows of pine trees. From under his blue tunic he drew out the piece of cloth, and let it flap against the breeze as he ran faster and faster.

He was very near the cross when he heard the thudding

of hoofs behind him. This amused him and spurred him to action: ‘I’ll wind the towel round before the man gets here,’ Dmitri thought, and the idea of such a race gave him much pleasure, for he felt sure he would win it. But the surface of the cross was smooth and his palms slipped down the beam. He tried again, this time relying on the strength of his knees, and still his hands could not sustain the grip.

Then Dmitri heard an angry voice:

“Where do you think you want to hide? In the sky?”

Dmitri turned his head and recognised Micchowski.

“I want to hang the Christ-towel.”

“Don’t try to fool me, Dmitri. It’s no use running away, I would catch you, even if you locked yourself up in a cloud. Come here!”

“I must finish my work.”

“Come here, I tell you. I could have you flogged for this, do you hear? Trying to run away after what I’ve done for you. . . . You must be stupid.”

“I only wanted . . .” Dmitri began.

Micchowski did not listen: he reached his hand out and wedged his outstretched fingers into Dmitri’s hair.

“You stubborn billy-goat!” And he pulled him so hard that the peasant’s head knocked against the saddle. “You warty pagan, you . . .”

“Don’t strike me! My mother never beat me!”

“Your mother, oh, yes, your mother!” shouted Micchowski. “A grown-up lad like you should run after girls, not after his mother.”

“Honourable sir,” Dmitri began, his nose flattened against the smelly leather.

“A dog would show more gratitude. Only yesterday I sent two peasants to work for your mother. And, to tell the truth, it was a stupid thing to do. I should have told them

to throw her into a bog. I can still get her out of the way. For good, Dmitri, do you hear? Just try to run away, just try!"

That night Dmitri did not sleep alone. Another bed was moved into his room, and on it, gazing at the beams on the ceiling, rested Captain Tobias Hume. It was the first night during which Dmitri lay awake. He thought of the two peasants slaving for his mother, and somehow his Christian soul could not feel any gratitude for this last gift he had received from his noble hosts.

Tobias Hume had enough common sense to view Miechowski's version of the incident at the cross in a less dramatic light, but he also knew that it would be foolish to offer his own simple interpretation. The more uncertain his partners were about the peasant's behaviour, the better chance he had of winning some respect from Seton-Setonski. So far the relations between the two Scots hardly suggested the familiarity that should spring between compatriots in exile. The Captain had, of course, tried his best to arrange a private meeting with Setonski, but each time he appeared in the doorway with his broken viol da gamba, the other would first joke about his instrument and then air his opinions on Italian music, which consisted of vague references to pavans.

"You say, Captain, you've made up a few tunes out of your own musical wit. Fancy that. You must sing them to us sometime. I hope you can sing," he would remark in his careful Polish, invariably ending the polite suggestion in a tone which implied his doubt as to the Captain's vocal abilities.

Tobias Hume could have succeeded, with some luck, in passing over this initial phrase, had it not been for awkward interruptions either from Miechowski or Father Stanislas.

He came to suspect that each of them employed a special spy to watch his instrument, as if it sheltered another soul of some dead Tsar, for as soon as he touched the viol da gamba, rat-like steps would sound in the corridor.

The priest at least pretended his entrances were casual, and always had a ready epigram to waste on the Northern barbarian who, as he soon found out, knew less Latin than pan Seton-Setonski. Father Stanislas cultivated his own theory about the Roman origin of noble families, and he showed some interest in the Captain's name. He said on one occasion:

"Kindly write your name down to illuminate my ignorance. Every time I hear it the word sounds different. Perhaps you have more surnames than one, like our valiant friends, the Spanish servants of Jesus."

Tobias hesitated, for he noticed that Seton-Setonski was about to leave the room.

"I trust you can write, Captain."

Angrily he scribbled his name on the open page of the Polish Bible, and the priest looked at the letters with prolonged attention. When Setonski stepped out of the room, the priest smiled and said:

"So you have only one name after all. And it's most unusual, my dear Captain. Hu-me," he pronounced the final letter in a bleating voice. "Yes, Captain, unusual yet clearly allegorical. *Humus* you were born and *humus* will be your habitation until the day of the Last Judgment. Is your Christian name Adam, for it would complete the allegory?"

"No, Father, Tobias."

"Tobias Humus. Your parents, it seems, sought favour from a high order of angels. I hope you meet your angel on this perilous road of life, for we know little what demons lurk around us while we fret, scheme and pursue our dark

ambitions. Not every Tobias, Captain, is granted the assistance of heavenly agents."

The priest took his time, sitting on a stool and turning the large pages of the Bible. Setonski was already in the courtyard, giving orders to his steward.

When perturbed by some cryptic thought, Father Stanislas was in the habit of blinking his eyes, and then his dry small face assumed an expression of acute pain. He wound up his peroration on Hume's name, still hinting at the allegory which he alone saw in the shape of a halo above the Captain's red hair:

"Your Roman ancestors, pagan though they were, Captain Humus, comprehended the sacred nature of the earth which we all tread with our mortal feet. They knew they were made of clay, in the image of God, and they feared the noble allegory of life which turns the abode of our soul into ashes. *Humus* will be your habitation, Captain."

Tobias distrusted the priest's words as much as he distrusted his politeness. He was the only man in Seton-Setonski's house who never slighted the Captain's pride, and this precisely made him the most difficult ally to deal with. Yet he could be won over to check Miechowski's authority, if only Tobias were certain as to what was brewing in the mind of his unapproachable host.

The day Miechowski chased the captive on his way to the solitary cross, Father Stanislas openly revealed his displeasure at the handling of the Dmitri scheme. His intelligent eyes blinked furtively when he spoke to Seton-Setonski, disregarding the Captain's presence. The priest stood near the green-tiled stove, and should he have wanted speedy help from allegory, he could have borrowed a few pictorial symbols from the ornaments on the tiles. Pagan mythology, however, was too remote to be linked with the business at

hand. The business called for anger, and anger for straightforward speech.

"My messenger has been found dead. Murdered. And not far from here," the priest said in one breath, and, clapping his hands, continued in a louder voice: "He's been lying under a cover of leaves for the last ten days."

"I am grieved to hear it," said Seton-Setonski.

"Do you know what it means, my well loved and respected sir? It means that I cannot contact my superiors at Vilna, it means that by some foul play we have been deprived of the wisest counsel, and whatever we do ourselves from now on runs the risk of being ill-conceived, rash, if not reckless. It may lead to another private war like the one which ended in the horrible death of the young Tsar."

"But, Father, I hold the same views, I . . ." Setonski interrupted.

"With your permission, my well-loved sir"—the priest's eyes blinked in angry agitation as if the flames of burning Moscow were about his face—"you should always remember that the Society of Jesus considered the expedition of our nobles into Muscovy as an unfortunate move, lacking in diplomacy and thus doomed to fail sooner or later. Pride led that band of fools, my respected sir, pride and greed. Without the support of the Crown and of our hetmans, without understanding the boyars or their clergy. They were responsible for the murder of Tsar Dmitri. We don't want another private war!" He shouted the last sentence, banging the cold stove with his small fists.

"You speak wisely, Father," Tobias Hume ventured to express his opinion. The priest looked at him, and the Captain felt that his outburst of sincerity had been appreciated and might render profit in due course.

At this moment Miechowski rushed in, dragging Dmitri. The peasant clutched a piece of cloth with both hands, the only proof of his innocence.

"I caught him, the sly little squirrel! Now he should get his first lesson. Nothing teaches better at school than a rod."

Dmitri tore himself away from Miechowski and, glancing quickly at the priest and Seton-Setonski, jumped to the Captain for protection: at least he knew him better than the others. This was the second smile of fortune Tobias received that afternoon. Both the Jesuit and the landlord turned their eyes to him, and though they did not smile, their faces held a sweet promise for the foreign soldier.

"The boy likes you, Captain," said Seton-Setonski.

"A simple heart turns to those who mean no evil, and it fears treacherous men." Uttering this remark, the priest did not blink his eyes: steadily he looked at Miechowski and left the room.

Investigations followed. The servants were asked whether they knew anything about the messenger to Vilna, and pan Miechowski, anxious to clear himself from suspicion, bullied them with particular eagerness, but none of them obliged the interrogators with a sham confession. As the hectic hours measured the sands of time, the orderly life in the manor slackened and, with people coming in and out, it was possible for the guests to communicate with one another unmolested by watchful eyes, at last free to vent their secret schemes.

Tobias Hume bumped into Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin, who had tiptoed out of his chamber, leaving Rukin to guard the corridor. The signatories of the pact stood face to face in the dark corner filled with heavy swords and morions. The presence of armour inspired the boyar and he whispered hurriedly, without bothering about the words of greeting:

"I've been thinking with my troubled head, foreigner, thinking day and night, and now I know what to do. My troubled head says there are three things to do."

"Three . . . ?" echoed the Captain.

"It's simple, foreigner. Very simple. First we strangle that black apostle of Antichrist, then we poison the Polish boyar and his thin-legged friend, and finally we set the devil's den on fire and take our little Tsar to holy mother Russia."

"Your plan is simple indeed," Tobias muttered with irony, "but I fear that your wise head may be chopped off before you start brewing your poison."

"Rukin knows all about poison, foreigner. He poisoned his father, by mistake of course, so he will be careful this time. Trust my nephew, he'll do it without fail."

"Your Highness, it's not that kind of cunning we should employ at present," Tobias spoke firmly. "Miechowski is in great trouble and before long Setonski will beg us for counsel. Just wait and be patient. We shall speak to him in a day or two, and this time he will listen. As for the priest, he needs a different noose, Your Highness, and we can help him to twist a hanging rope for himself. He'll put it round his neck like a string of beads. Just wait and be patient."

"Oh, I hate that black raven from Rome!" Nikitin stamped his foot, upset the heap of iron, and the two men, frightened by the clangour, fled in opposite directions.

The Captain was not surprised when Seton-Setonski asked him to sleep in Dmitri's room. Nor was he taken aback by these courteous words:

"It would be a pleasure for me if I could have a longer talk with you. In private, Captain."

"When?"

"To-morrow, after morning Mass."

Only one night divided the promise and the fulfilment. Yet no sleep came to shorten the Captain's expectation. He gazed at the beams on the ceiling, while in the bed next to his lay Dmitri, also awake, thinking of the two peasants whom the nobles had sent to look after his mother. And that night the young man hankered after his native place, after the hayrick's fragrance and the raucous music of the marshes. Like a schoolboy, his curiosity blunted by too much novelty, Dmitri wanted to go home.

After the sleepless night the boy was taken to a small room in the right wing of the manor, where, against a large Persian carpet on the wall, stood his tutors ready with their first lesson. The lesson was easy to follow. Squatting on a lynx skin, his mouth wide open, the boy listened to a story of adventure. It had one thing in common with him, the name of the hero. Hearing the name Dmitri repeated in every sentence, the boy from the Pripet Marshes felt a growing sympathy for the little son of the Tsar Ivan, abiding in the city of Uglich, and he clapped his hands with delight when he learnt how the clever Dmitri had escaped from the hands of horrible murderers. The poor child, abandoned by his own subjects, had gone into exile, and in the land of the Poles found many a kind heart. There at the court of a great noble he grew up to be a dauntless youth, his eyes always turned to the East, to Moscow, to his stolen throne. Then one day he revealed his identity, and his Polish friends bowed before the righteous ruler of Muscovy. The happy news reached Russia, and made the usurper tremble on his throne.

"And listen to this, Dmitri, my boy," Miechowski continued, "when one day in October the army of Dmitri Ivanovich crossed the Russian frontier, the bright sun

crowned his head, and the wind from the steppes kissed his Imperial standard. And . . ." The words flew on and on. The peasant's thoughts seemed to be reflected in their depth, and no echoes disturbed the enchantment, for the soft carpets of the East guarded the secrecy of the walls around.

And someone else guarded the narrator. With his foot resting on a hassock, there stood in the corner the friend and confessor of pan Seton-Setonski. Father Stanislas knew the story well, but he listened attentively, weaving perhaps in his mind patterns of allegory as intricate as those on the carpets.

At the other end of the spacious manor, Captain Tobias Hume was intertwining different threads. His pattern, however, lacked clarity, and resembled those strange lines one sees on the back of a carpet. He began his argument well, giving Setonski a list of facts, and all the facts were relevant to the Dmitri case. The Polonised Scot seemed favourably inclined and from the start treated the agreement between the Captain and the boyar as a legal document. He nodded with approval when Tobias read out the clause referring to his future appointment as Commander of the Imperial Guard. He added up on paper the approximate sum that would come from taxes once the Captain had succeeded in enlisting more mercenary soldiers from abroad. The only thing that slightly cooled their otherwise amicable discussion was Setonski's insistence on talking Polish.

"I prefer to keep to one language," he would say whenever Tobias used his native tongue. "I admit I speak Polish with less fluency than you, Captain, but I find that by deliberating on the choice of my words I can also express my thoughts more clearly. I hope you understand."

Then the first difficulty occurred. Pan Seton-Setonski explained in his careful vocabulary that he had also signed

a certain document with a certain Polish nobleman who—for obvious reasons—should remain nameless. This, however, should not worry the Captain, Setonski argued, because the two rolls of mere paper, as he put it, could be examined in greater detail when the cause of Tsar Dmitri became a political reality.

Tobias Hume watched Setonski's hand as it slowly moved under the mop of his grey hair, smoothing out the creases on his forehead. The day was hot and they both sweated. The whole interview had amounted to no more than a polite appraisal of the Captain's integrity, and the only reference to the near future concerned his part in the training of the peasant.

"I am aware that your military experience is superior to ours, and the boy will be grateful to you one day. He needs your guidance, Captain."

Setonski's hand stopped rubbing his forehead, and dropped a trifle wearily on the four pieces of paper which Tobias had displayed. The landlord turned one of the narrow strips and an oblong drawing intrigued his eye. He looked at the back of the other strips and saw more drawings, some encircled by notes in spidery writing.

"What are these plans?"

"My machine."

"A useful machine?"

"Yes, very useful."

"In war or in peace?"

"All machines are planned for war, sir," the Captain replied curtly.

"I know, I know. And how many enemies could your machine destroy?"

"I believe it could put an army to flight and kill at least thirty thousand!"

“Thirty thousand, you say, Captain?”

“Yes.”

“I hope it won’t take thirty years to build.”

“The Great Machine could be finished in a few months, provided I had money, wood, sulphur, and, of course, a band of healthy peasants.”

Seton-Setonski nodded repeatedly as he listened to the now enthusiastic voice of his guest. He rose and looked the Captain in the eyes.

“I think we must have another conversation. Yes, very soon. And in private.”

Tobias Hume bowed and began collecting his plans from the table. On leaving Seton-Setonski he heard voices at the far end of the corridor. One of them was the chanting voice of Dmitri. Tobias stepped forward to meet the boy.

He found him in the company of his tutors. Miechowski held his pupil by the hand and seemed very pleased. Father Stanislas said with a smile:

“You should sing *Gaudeamus* with us, Captain Humus.”

“Am I, then, invited to your academy?”

The priest blinked his eyes, searching his mind for an epigrammatic phrase, but Dmitri interrupted him:

“Captain,” he asked, “do you know where the Tsar is now, and where is his army?”

“Tsar Dmitri is dead,” Tobias replied.

“Our Captain believes in rumours. Pity.” To these words of Miechowski the priest added his own comment:

“Pan Humus, I am convinced, wished to say more. He knows that putrid earth fashions our cradle as well as our grave. And new roots shall spring forth from the burial ground. Earth is our constant habitation. *Nos habebit humus*, Captain, yet let us rejoice.”

CHAPTER IV

Sables and Plums

EVERYBODY was taken by surprise. The blue tunics jostled in the sun as the servants ran to and fro, gesticulating, cursing one another. Inside the manor the coffer lids screeched: heavy garments, dragged out in a hurry, were falling on to the carpeted floor like scentless giant petals, and the silver buttons on them seemed hailstones that glistened before melting.

Someone shouted for a seamstress, and in answer to his call two women trotted along the corridor, each carrying a bundle of furs, as if forest beasts had jumped upon them from the ceiling. Then sables, marten and ermine mingled with velvet and silk, and many hands began to disembowel this absurd mound amidst a twitter of female voices.

"Where are my white boots? My white boots!" Michowski cried almost in despair from across the hall, and soon the whole wing resounded with questions fired from every chamber, where the gentlemen were struggling with their festive robes.

Only Father Stanislas had no need to change his everyday apparel. In his sombre cassock he assisted the peasant boy, who was being dressed up to receive the emissaries from Russia. Cautiously these had stopped in a village a mile away, awaiting an escort from the manor. Tobias Hume had seemed the obvious choice for this task.

"Is Jan Humus gone?" asked the priest, seeing Michowski in the doorway.

"Yes, Father. The Muscovites should be here in half an

hour." Miechowski's answer sounded casual, but his eyes betrayed grave apprehension. They were now watching Dmitri's arms stretched outward while the servants arranged his purple sleeves, and these raised arms had for Miechowski a semblance of fate, weighing two quivering scales. The boy Dmitri could let fall his chance as easily as he could drop his arms.

Those emissaries, whoever they were, had chosen to arrive just after harvest, in the seventh week of Dmitri's training. This was unfair to the tutors, who had done their utmost to equip the peasant with a theoretical knowledge of the world, and so far—Miechowski was happy to admit—the pupil had made quick progress. His finger could travel vast distances over the map of Muscovy, his tongue could feel the palate of the past, and what the lips still failed to name, gestures were already able to suggest. Dmitri did what he was told or shown; he imitated the accent of Nikitin, the laughter of Rukin, and the military postures of Tobias Hume.

Miechowski's memory must have been panelled with magic mirrors, for it reflected the ghost of the Tsar, his movements as well as his words, and the boy could ape the apparitions without perhaps realising that he was borrowing a mask from death. Sometimes even Miechowski shuddered at the sight of so guileless a mummer, and wondered whether the youth had any inkling of what it was all about. He certainly never pretended more than his masters taught him; this fidelity to the curriculum, however, could become the worst handicap in a moment of surprise.

Surprise! Miechowski's eyes were so glazed with it that he hardly saw more than a bleared outline of Dmitri. Only the two arms stayed clear, suspended over soft folds and whispers: the arms of fate.

"Only seven weeks!" Miechowski exclaimed and his own squeaky voice startled him.

"Yet with the help of God . . ." the priest began.

"Seven months wouldn't be enough," Miechowski continued, unaware that Father Stanislas was trying to console him. "That's why I wanted no one to intrude, no one to learn of his presence here. I could have taken him to my place, but I preferred this God-forsaken district, because I thought it would be safer. Had we but six months of complete isolation! How in heaven's name did those sly Muscovite foxes sniff out our secret hole!"

"We are at the very edge of the Marshes, pan Miechowski," the priest said, "and behind us we left a trail which the drying bogs have preserved. And whoever sniffed your golden coins, pan Miechowski, had a fine nose, fine and long. Soon you'll see the tip of this nose, and if you pull it hard, you may perhaps find your coins in the nostrils."

Miechowski waved his hand impatiently. He hardly understood what Father Stanislas was saying. Neither did Dmitri. He was sweating under the load of garments, dreading the belt that still lay across his bare toes: any minute now it would uncoil and grip his stomach, as if to squeeze the food out of it. They had not let him finish his meal, and this prejudiced his body against the warmth of furs and the cool touch of buttons.

"I am hungry," he announced, and seeing Miechowski's bewilderment, confirmed the words with a loud sniff. The obliging tutor looked around, and, noticing a bowl of fruit near the window, snatched it as hastily as if Dmitri's life were at stake, and placed it on a chest between a marten cap and a pair of dainty shoes. Dmitri snuffed in gratitude and proceeded to eat plums, spitting the stones out over the crouching servants.

At this moment Nikitin and his nephew entered. They both seemed fatter in their new robes, which were edged with sable. Rukin had shaved off his short beard for the occasion and gained much in youthful appearance: in fact he looked only a little older than Dmitri. Having sacrificed this natural adornment, the Russian took particular pride in his red boots, which he exhibited by pacing the room with long strides.

His uncle had no such vain desire to display his splendour: he ignored the priest and Miechowski and rushed straight to Dmitri, pushing the servants aside. First he picked up the belt and fastened it loosely round the waist so as not to spoil the stiff line of the garment, then he knelt in front of the peasant and, before putting the shoes on his feet, he humbly polished the silver buckles on them with his own sleeve. Getting up, he noticed the plums, and this delighted him.

"Oh, sharp soul, happy must you be in your new sheath, for you remember those merry banquets when your former hands were giving plums to those you favoured with your Imperial grace."

Dmitri acknowledged the boyar's apostrophe to his sharp soul by swallowing two plums at once. The allegorical devices of the Muscovite heretics had little appeal for Father Stanislas: he smiled ironically and took a fruit from the bowl. This irritated Ivan Ivanovich, and prompted him to remark:

"You'd better tell the Romish priest, pan Miechowski, that he should stay in his chapel and wait till the audience is over."

Miechowski was willing to compromise, especially at the priest's expense; he nodded, bowed and nodded again. These two barbarians, he thought, were no longer a nuisance. On the contrary, they might render considerable service to the cause on this day of tribulation, provided

they had not meanwhile conceived a perfidious stratagem to welcome the occasion in their own fashion. He answered Nikitin with the nervous crackle in his voice which persisted despite his demure politeness:

"Ivan Ivanovich, all can be arranged to satisfy your wishes. But, my most noble and illustrious sir, may I draw your attention to a somewhat disconcerting matter. Supposing these men from Russia, these men whom we don't know at all, supposing they ask our young friend . . ." here he pointed at Dmitri, hesitating how to express his thought without provoking bad luck.

"They won't dare to ask anything," Nikitin burst out. "They'll have to beg me first to allow them to speak."

"And I'll keep a steady eye on them, uncle," Rukin added, twisting his trimmed moustache.

"My boy"—Miechowski turned to Dmitri who was about to spit a stone back into the bowl—"my good boy, I trust you'll keep silent on that chair out there. You see, Dmitri, we'll do the talking for you. To tell the truth, it will be more interesting for you to listen. Just as in a lesson, you know."

"Where is the Captain?" the peasant asked and snuffled again. The plums had pacified his stomach, but not his nerves.

"He'll be back presently, my boy."

"And he'll stand near me?"

"No," the boyar replied for Miechowski, "we two, my very self and my nephew, will stand on both sides of the Imperial stool."

Dmitri wondered whether the bearded foreigner was on the point of leaving to fetch that stool from Moscow, and was puzzled that a Russian landlord should be so anxious to stand by any stool.

Quick steps were heard then, and the servants, recognising their master, sneaked out of the room.

"They're in the courtyard," Seton-Setonski called out from the corridor. He entered briskly, cracking a plumstone under his heel. There was no time to waste on talking. He eyed Dmitri up and down, pointed at the marten cap on the chest, and the boy obediently placed it on his head, tucking in his reddish hair to please the silent master. The master was pleased. He said very calmly:

"Then, gentlemen, let us go to meet them. God be our guide." Setonski crossed himself and straightened his massive shoulders. Father Stanislas hesitated whether to support this sign of piety with his official blessing. He raised his hand slightly, but the ring on his finger inspired him to a different gesture. He took it off and gave it to Dmitri. The peasant held it in his palm, not daring to slip it on to his finger.

"Oh, yes, the rings," said Seton-Setonski, and took Dmitri's hand gently into his. Soon all the rings of the landlord slid one by one down the peasant's fingers.

Dmitri began to rub the knuckles over which the golden circlets had passed and, dazzled or frightened by their glitter, asked the one question no one in the room had expected:

"Honourable sir, have you invited my mother?"

"Your mother?" Seton-Setonski was baffled.

Dmitri stepped back and, gazing at his hands, muttered:

"I want my mother to see me in this beautiful dress."

Nikitin nudged his nephew and Rukin stared at Setonski.

"Now, Dmitri, don't be obstinate," said Miechowski, but the boy shook his head and whispered:

"I shan't go. I shan't."

There was no anger on Seton-Setonski's face: a large fatherly smile spread over his features, from the tips of his moustache to the wrinkles under the grey tuft of his hair.

"Dmitri, you will see your mother. Not to-day, of course, but very soon."

"I don't believe you. You said that many times. And instead you sent your men to guard her and she, poor pigeon, groans now under their whips. You took our land, and you . . ."

"Dmitri," the landlord interrupted without raising his voice, "you will dress up again for your mother when she comes to see you. The Captain will bring her here. You trust the Captain, don't you?"

"The Captain . . . When?"

"To-morrow. Now go quickly to that chair in the hall. Sit there and look at your rings. One of them will be yours, if you behave well."

"The biggest ring?"

"Yes, Dmitri, the one with a red crown. It's yours and you'll show it to your mother. To-morrow, yes, to-morrow, my good boy."

"I've been good, haven't I? I learnt three large pages of the Bible by heart, yesterday morning I did. Didn't I, pan Miechowski?"

"Your memory is as excellent as mine," Miechowski admitted eagerly. "But you mustn't talk about your lessons when you're seated on the chair." The chief tutor reflected on what he had just said and patted the boy on his crumpled collar. "To tell the truth, Dmitri, the guests might not be interested in your lessons. You know, you're a grown-up lad and too clever to need much learning."

"I'll keep quiet," the peasant muttered and stared

hard at Setonski to discover whether his promise was still reflected in his eyes. The landlord was making a sign of the cross, and this Dmitri took for a solemn oath.

"I'll go to the chapel and pray that all may be well," he heard the priest say, and this, too, he thought, would secure the pledge.

The chair demanded more attention from Dmitri than the four men who were huddled behind the Captain at the other end of the hall: the back of the chair pressed his collar and the curved arms squeezed the folds of his robe, making the belt bulge out. Dmitri pushed the belt in, but one of the rings hitched a stud and a wrestle of precious metal began right in his lap, the green and red stones squinting and snarling at one another. 'The studs envy my big stone its red crown,' mused the boy, and he tried to protect his treasure from the clutches of the belt.

He overheard Nikitin, whose angry whisper came from above his chair:

"Why don't these beggars speak, what's wrong?"

"The Poles stand in their way, uncle," Rukin whispered back.

The peasant twisted his neck to look up, but his collar uncurled like a sleepy cat along his neck and threatened to leap straight into the battle of the rings. 'They'll be angry with me if I don't keep still,' Dmitri thought in panic, and as the Captain was to fetch his mother, he looked first for the familiar hat in the group standing by the entrance.

The Captain's hat was there; moreover, his voice resounded from one end of the hall to the other:

"These noble envoys cannot speak."

"Are they cowards, have they no tongues?" Nikitin boomed from above the chair.

"Indeed they have no tongues, Ivan Ivanovich."

"What?" Seton-Setonski's voice rebounded from an anticipation of horror.

"The thief Shuiski who rules in Moscow," Tobias Hume went on, "had their tongues pulled out, for they had spoken the name Dmitri, the name which is thundering in the harvest sky of Russia."

"These brave and faithful boyars have ears and eyes, Captain," said Miechowski, relieved that the cruel tyrant had unwittingly shielded the boy Dmitri from disgrace. "They can still witness the living miracle of Providence," he roared triumphantly. The guardians of the chair, overcome by curiosity, left their ceremonial posts and like two fierce species from an Imperial bestiary sprang towards the dumb emissaries.

Yet Miechowski's hypocrisy was masking a premature triumph: the fourth boyar, who had already enlightened the Captain with the news from Moscow, was neither dumb nor slow-witted. He was so astute, in fact, that he had not hesitated to use his miserable companions as a bait for Setonski and his Russo-Polish plotters. While the hosts were shedding their sympathy on the three guests, pitying their scars and shabby clothes, he trotted up to Dmitri's chair and put his old face against the peasant's, almost touching the brooch on the marten cap.

Dmitri twitched his nose and nearly sneezed, for the stranger's breath reeked of garlic. Yet he managed to keep his head still, and only the studded belt dropped down together with his right hand. The old man tried a more comfortable position to observe the doll-like figure propped up against the wooden frame. He leant backwards, bit his pale lips and sent his roving eye from the rusty wisps of hair under the cap to the strong chin and the swarthy neck. Thus scrutinised for half a minute or so, Dmitri felt a chill

in his spine, and his tongue slid out. As soon as he licked the wart above his lip, the old man started and once more pushed his face forward.

This time the peasant grinned, for the perplexed face under a halo of white hair reminded him of an icon he had once seen in a monastery to which his mother had taken him during a plague. He remembered that under the holy picture of Saint Nicholas the kind monks had taught him to read and write, and the glaring eyes from the icon returned now to find out whether he had forgotten any letters of the two alphabets.

Saint Nicholas, in the guise of the envoy Morozov, wanted to find out a great deal about the pupil who was receiving a far stricter tuition than that of the docile monks. The walking icon asked:

"Young fellow, say something. I'd like to hear your voice."

Dmitri, however, had received the promise from Setonski and not from Saint Nicholas whom he respected but not feared, so he stuck to his part of the bargain, and remained silent.

"Have those Poles also pulled your tongue out, eh? Say something, anything that comes into your head."

At last Nikitin realised what a dangerous situation had developed by the Imperial stool. He charged towards it, his ceremonial axe lowered and his red boots flickering like flames.

"How dare you!" he yelled at Morozov, who immediately jumped back and mumbled:

"I only begged the favour . . ."

"What did you say?" Miechowski squeaked, rushing up and drawing his sword. "Speak up, man!"

"Speak up!" echoed Rukin, who had no idea what was going on.

All this time Dmitri fiddled with his belt and looked round in confusion, thinking that he had annoyed his tutors. 'Why don't they tell me what to do?' He caught sight of Seton-Setonski, who was making frantic signs with his fingers, now on his mouth, now on his forehead.

"Don't play the dumb fool!" someone shouted, and the boy in his simple innocence gathered that they were urging him to speak. 'Why have they changed their minds?' he thought helplessly. And as the bullied Morozov was trying to think up some excuse for his misdemeanour, there came from the Imperial stool a slow sentence in Russian. It was the question which Dmitri had asked after his first lesson with Miechowski:

"Where is the army of the Tsar?"

His voice echoed throughout the hall and fell on the mute envoys like a bell severed from a rope. They hit the floor with their heads and began to crawl to the man who was so imperial in his anger. The whole guilt of faithless Muscovy lay crumpled under their groping hands.

Nikitin and Rukin leapt to their places by the chair and stood brandishing their axes. Dmitri did not dare to look up in fear that the ferocious guards might chop off his head. Perhaps he had failed his tutors and angered the landlord. With his eyes closed tight he heard Nikitin shout at the top of his voice:

"Don't you know how to greet your Tsar?"

And then Rukin cried as loudly as his uncle:

"On your knees! And speak your words of homage, you who still have your tongue! Speak them well so that all the noble lords present here shall witness them and know whether you are friend or traitor."

"On your knees!" squeaked Miechowski, and his sword clinked, it seemed against the shield of sunshine.

Morozov had been on his knees for some time. In the hush that ensued, the boy Dmitri wondered in dread and excitement which of the strangers might be the Tsar. Surely not that Saint Nicholas who had escaped from the icon, though he could be the Tsar's great-uncle. Then, his eyes still closed, he heard a croaky, miserable chant:

"Lord and Emperor of all Russia, Great Duke of Vladimir, Moscow and Novgorod, King of Kazan, King of Astrakhan, Great Duke of Smolensk, of Tver . . . Lord and Great Duke of Ryazan, of Pskov . . . of Yaroslavl . . . Commander of all Siberia. . . ."

The list of names rang in his darkness and the tapestry on the walls caressed every sound before absorbing it. The man on the chair recognised the familiar music of the map whose string-like rivers he had strummed with his fingers, waiting for the answer of those twisted lines and small circles. Now he was hit by the surging waves of the lakes and the steppes. The pupil heard his lessons recite their own magical monologue. Something touched his hand and he did not withdraw it, something gently struck his buckles and he did not move his legs.

When the chanting map folded back into silence, Dmitri slowly opened his eyelids, and the first thing he saw was the Captain's rapier. Tobias Hume held it up, and his eyes like sentries placed on both sides of the erect blade were directed to the chair. The Captain was saluting someone, whom, Dmitri did not care, for the eyes, he thought, looked at him. And with great affection.

In his mind, Captain Tobias Hume saluted the coming of age of his agreement with Iván Ivanovich Nikitin, who had acted in this hour of crisis with an efficiency astounding in a Muscovite. As for Nikitin, he had only one emotion in his heart: a profound loathing for the boyar Morozov, whose

tongue—he sighed with regret—the negligent Shuiski had omitted to pull out.

That night at a banquet table one seat was unoccupied. The dark wood of Dmitri's chair castigated Morozov, who ate in gloom at the opposite end of the table. He had Nikitin on his right and Rukin on his left. Ivan Ivanovich did not spare the old boyar, who, hunched over a large plate, seemed more a dwarf than a man. His white beard shook as he swallowed food, his tired eyes watered.

"You grieved Our Little Sun," Nikitin would repeat whenever Morozov's sorrow appeared to slacken after a gulp of wine. Rukin embroidered freely on his uncle's refrain:

"No doubt he prays now," said the nephew, "prays and weeps, but should the Little Sun pass through a dark cloud in his prayers, the cloud could burst into a storm of anger. Let us beware of his terrible anger."

Morozov bewared, particularly of all those probing questions which Nikitin would drop suddenly. The questions alluded to money which he thought should soon be coming from Russia, to letters which he believed had been written but not delivered. Micchowski rescued Morozov from utter collapse. He came up to his seat and with a mysterious smile whispered that the Lord and Emperor of all Russia might after all honour the company by appearing, for a short time only. The Tsar was tired, he said. Grieved? No, the Tsar had no cause for grief, not this evening anyway. The Pole glanced sideways at the empty seat near which he had wisely placed the dumb boyars.

Back in his chair Micchowski overheard Seton-Setonski, who was engrossed in a conversation with Captain Hume.

"Such a big running tower doesn't seem safe to me, Captain."

"Not safe?"

Tobias had a pile of small bones by his plate. He had accumulated them, eating the meat courses hurriedly. With these bones he illustrated the technical principles of his invention. Setonski looked again at what seemed to be a rectangular composition built round a chicken breast.

"It could easily collapse," he said, frowning.

"It will collapse," the Captain answered in great exultation, "that is the point of my invention."

"The whole scaffolding of boxes, Captain?"

"Yes, the whole of it. And the boxes will roll down, and while rolling they will open. Not all at once of course."

"Not all?"

"No. The foul vapours and sulphur, as I told you before, require careful treatment. Now when the boxes burst open, the wheels under them . . ."

Micchowski interrupted the Captain, leaning over the table to shift the bowl of fruit towards Setonski. This was the sign that the boy should be fetched. The Captain rose.

Seeing a bowl full of plums in front of his seat, Dmitri felt confident: he could eat them and at the same time play a simple game with the Russians, the game which Rukin had explained to him earlier in the evening.

One by one the mute wretches approached his chair and each received a plum. The peasant was not surprised that they swallowed the offered fruit at once, and with a visible indication of relish. When Morozov's turn came, he trotted along the table with his head bent down, and the boy wished that he could give this strange little man all the plums and the bowl as well, for he looked so haggard and shabby. Their eyes did not meet. The boyar ate his plum, took the stone out, rubbed it against his beard, and mumbled something inaudibly. The stone was hard and dry as

a relic, and the old man hid it behind his tattered belt.

Dmitri thought that one day his mother, too, would be like this poor man, white-haired, withered and timid. He wanted to say a kind word to that beggarly Saint Nicholas who was hurrying back to his seat as if he had to plant his plum-stone there. But Dmitri had promised not to speak. Fixed to his chair he stared, and when the heat and the fumes of voices tired him, he dozed off, rocking unswaddled thoughts. Tobias tiptoed to him and touched his shoulder. The boy woke up with a jerk and said:

"These men . . . They could have brought my mother."

From the other end of the table the dwarfish creature muttered:

"We couldn't, Little Sun, we couldn't. The Shuiski men keep her under guard. And she thinks you're dead, my Lord."

On both sides of Dmitri's chair the boyars buried their faces in soundless weeping: their eyes spoke with the ghostly tongues of sorrow.

Five hours later Dmitri heard the door open slowly. The four emissaries entered his room, and Morozov's voice croaked over the Captain's bed.

"If you move, we'll strangle you. Don't look for your weapon, I've got it."

In the frayed light of dawn the peasant witnessed a strange scene. The old boyar whispered to his dumb companions:

"Undress quickly." And he himself began to take off his clothes. Soon the beggarly men stood almost naked, but their bodies shimmered, making them look like those golden apostles Nikitin had once spoken of. Indeed, the men were covered with sheets of fine gold. So Nikitin had not lied: the shining statues trod the holy land of Russia, and though

mute they had eyes that could glare like the stone pupils of rings.

Having shed their golden skins the emissaries pushed the thin plates under Dmitri's bed, and Morozov, his parched, crinkled chest inclined in a bow, said these trembling words:

"Guard them, Little Father, and change this gold into iron. The army of the Tsar will speak with a voice of iron."

The peasant wished the Captain could explain what these strangers meant, and why they preferred iron to gold. Since he had seen the nobles thank for a gift with a gift, the boy thought he should now act in a manner worthy of his masters.

"Take this," he whispered, and pressed his big ring into the scooped palm of the old man. "And don't lose it," he added, "it's got a beautiful red crown."

"The Tsar's gifts are never lost," Morozov answered through tears, "birds recognise them and return what is the Tsar's to the Tsar. For the winged hunters of the skies never fail to honour the Little Sun, they respect him better than we faithless men. Forgive me, my great Lord, my Merciful Father."

The four men collected their rags and sneaked out of the room, naked.

"Was he drunk?" Dmitri asked the Captain, who was sitting up in his bed, whistling.

"No, not at all."

"Whom did he take me for, Captain?"

"For the Tsar, Dmitri, my boy."

"But I am not the Tsar, any Tsar."

"Perhaps not the Tsar, but you could become a Tsar."

"Why do you say that, Captain?"

"Because I lay great hopes in you, Dmitri. And you must trust me. Not the Poles, and not the Russians, but me . . . your obedient master."

CHAPTER V

The Mercenaries

“**A**ND the chasuble which the foreigners left under the hayrick, that chasuble, Dmitri, I hung on the new cross by the birches.”

“You shouldn’t have put it there, mother. Christ didn’t wear a chasuble, or a cassock for that matter.”

“Well, it isn’t there any more, my little falcon. Five Sundays ago the bees swarmed and they flew straight at the chasuble. Their queen must have liked those lilies on it. And the golden threads looked just like trickling honey. You should have seen it, Dmitri. But the trouble I had taking the swarm down. . . . My Osip gathered the bees into the chasuble, as into a sack he put them, that Osip of mine.”

“Who is Osip, mother?”

“One of the two men your rich masters sent to me. But the other is lazy, and he eats too much, and your beautiful horse, Dmitri, kicked him for his laziness. A clever horse you gave me, my little one. And Osip always says that with so many rich landlords around you, you could become a bailiff or a horse-dealer or a . . .”

“That Osip knows nothing, mother.”

“Oh, he knows as much as a pedlar, and, besides, he was working for your big landlord these last fourteen winters. He says the landlord drinks the King’s wine from a golden goblet, and he even drank once with the King himself. Oh, yes, Osip knows everything. Just look at him, my little falcon, how he feeds the horse, not too much fodder and not too little. Just watch that Osip of mine.”

Dmitri looked at the man by the cart. The cart was long and lean, and the man stocky and short. The Captain's hat with new greenish plumes towered above the man, whose long hair was cut in a fringe straight above his eyebrows. He had a protruding jaw and an upturned nose. In that body apparently dwelt a sparkling spirit which could tame hungry horses and swarming bees, a peasant spirit that understood the great designs of the nobles. The boy watched Osip for some time and thought that he was perhaps of some use to his mother. Moreover, the Captain, a clever man indeed, considered him trustworthy enough for the transport of the Russian gold, on those screeching wheels with no iron in them, and under a layer of musty old straw.

The Captain said something to Osip, for the latter jumped to the back of the cart and stuck a wooden frame behind the straw.

"Barbaral!" the man shouted to Dmitri's mother, "Barbara, we'll have room only for one barrel of beer. And you'll sit on it all the way home, and keep a sharp eye on the General's load. He says we mustn't lose it, not even a tiny chip of it."

"Psst," the Captain hissed and quickly turned round. The courtyard was almost empty. They stood at the far end of it where the fence bordered on an orchard. Ripening apples peeped from the branches leaning over the fence, and the horse, when the flies bothered its rump, waved to the apples in a most friendly manner.

"Barbara," Osip cried as loudly as before, "we mustn't talk about the General's load to anyone. Not to a soul."

Tobias Hume hissed his 'psst' again, punching the man between the shoulders, and this reminder was received with servile appreciation.

Dmitri felt like hitting Osip on the mouth.

"How dare he belch his Barbaras at you? Why doesn't he call you pani?"

"Oh, I am not a pani for him. They can call you pan Dmitri, if they fancy you equal, my little falcon, but you're in good service and you don't work with your hands now as you used to. My Osip treats me well. He would never beat me."

"Beat you, mother? I'd kill him, if he even . . ."

"He's a good soul, son, a good Christian soul."

The Captain stalked up to them and inclined his head.

"I trust you explained to your mother that the thing should be buried in a safe place, safe and not conspicuous," he said, and anxiously glanced back towards the cart.

"She knows what to do, Captain."

"Five feet underground by Dmitri's cross," the woman uttered in one breath.

"I hung my Christ-towels on it the day you arrived, remember, Captain."

"I remember."

"I wish you would allow me to show the shining sheets to Ivan Ivanovich and Alexey Petrovich. I am sure they would like to see them."

"By sweet Saint Andrew they would. But you promised me, Dmitri, to keep quiet about the thing and the place it's going to. I brought your dear mother here for you and I'll bring her again. I always do what I promise."

"Oh, honourable General," the woman broke in, "had you not come, I would have cried my heart out, with my own weeping eyes, I would . . ."

As soon as she mentioned her weeping eyes, she began to sob, her hands groping about the Captain's knees in a grateful embrace. Then she covered Dmitri's face with

kisses, caressed his hair, and amidst sighs repeated what she had already told him:

"They wouldn't let me come here. For weeks I've been trying to see you. Last Sunday I waited outside the gate and the dogs were barking at me from every hole in that terrible fence."

"They have good dogs here," Dmitri remarked, thinking that his mother might appreciate this information.

"I thought I would never see you again with my weeping eyes."

"I thought the same." And the boy's own eyes were filled with tears, which he tried to hide, turning his head away from the Captain.

In a spirit of solidarity Tobias Hume ventured to defend his colleagues and allies. He muttered something about a heavy rainfall in the second week of harvest which had swept away many logs on the narrow paths in the Marshes. He referred most considerately to his and their regard for Dmitri's mother, how anxious they had been to spare her the hardships and dangers of a journey through the bogs. He stopped, however, when his pupil scoffed at his picturesque description of those impenetrable vapourish swamps which even wolves pass by, gnashing their teeth and howling.

"There is a forest road which you took to bring me here," Dmitri said bluntly. "And the wolves, well . . ." He did not wish to enlighten the Captain on this subject, for it simply frightened him to talk about the wolves.

Tobias excused himself for a moment, for he had just noticed Nikitin's head in the orchard. The boyar's horse was almost hidden by the fence, and only his black beard rode among the branches, disturbing the ripe stillness of apples.

The Captain speeded his steps and, passing through a small gate, found Nikitin in an idyllic embrace with a tree. The Russian had halted his horse and was now shaking apples from a thick branch.

"Help me to pick them up. I can't reach the ground from my saddle," he said to Tobias. The Captain obliged the boyar and soon they were both eating apples, the animal moving slowly along the fence.

"I am on my way to Morozov and the others. They are waiting in the village for fresh horses."

"Ivan Ivanovich, you won't tell them about my journey to Russia?"

"No," the boyar said between two powerful bites. From his saddle he could see the woman and her son still talking. "You shouldn't have brought her here, foreigner."

The Captain looked up and answered casually:

"She won't make a nuisance of herself, Ivan Ivanovich."

They could now hear the chanting voice of Dmitri: only the fence divided them from the peasant and his mother.

"That slave Osip, yes . . ." Nikitin mused. "When she takes him to her bed, there will be no more trouble." The boyar laughed as he said this, and to enjoy the idea in coarser phrasing, he shouted over the fence:

"Osip, you lazy dog! Don't you know how to lie on a woman!"

"I do, most honourable Highness," Osip shouted back and bowed towards the orchard.

Dmitri's eyes stared at Nikitin. There was mute hatred in them, but the Captain could not see it, for his plumes were just at the level of the fence, their green lost against the leaves.

"Mother," whispered Dmitri, staring now at the bowing man, "mother, I shall make you happy. You'll live in my

castle when I become a Tsar. In your own chamber covered with carpets."

"You mustn't talk such foolishness, my little falcon. Osip says that the landlords often poke fun at their servants. They get drunk and joke, and when they joke, my Osip says . . ."

"Osip is a stupid ram, mother."

"Don't call him that, Dmitri. One day, you'll have to kiss his hand."

"I'll spit on his dirty hand."

The woman cast her eyes down, gathered her skirt as if she were about to join a dancing ring, and then, turning her head upwards, said through a coy giggle:

"Osip and me, I and my Osip, we two are in a manner of speaking betrothed. And you'll have a loving father again, Dmitri, yes you will."

The boy spat, not on Osip's hand, but into his own palm. His fingers contracted and clasped the dagger dangling from his belt. Dmitri drew it out and threw it at the fence: the blade drove into the wood, splitting its mossy skin. His clenched lips said nothing.

"My little falcon," the woman pleaded, her pale blue eyes wandering along the row of loops on his tunic, "ever since you left me I was so lonely and frightened. I thought I would never see you with my weeping eyes. And . . ."

"Mother," Dmitri interrupted, rubbing the wart on his cheek, "I must speak to the Captain."

Quickly he went up to the fence, pulled his dagger out, looked at its edges, and, holding the weapon in his hand, ran to the wicket-gate. The Captain was busy collecting apples into his hat.

"You can't kill a tree with a dirk, my boy," he said smiling.

"Take me with you to Russia, Captain."

"You must stay here, Dmitri. And learn a lot more things. Pan Miechowski and Rukin will look after you. And Ivan Ivanovich too. When he comes back, that is."

"I don't like Ivan Ivanovich," growled the boy, and then asked quickly: "Will he bring the old boyar with the white beard?"

"No. Morozov must hurry to your friends in Muscovy."

"Have I many friends there?"

"We shall soon see, my good boy."

"I thought I had only one friend."

"Me?" Tobias said, ready to bestow another smile on his grateful pupil.

"You too . . ." Dmitri answered, and after an awkward pause he added: "The little man with the white beard liked me, and I like him, more and more, Captain."

"Well, Morozov would be very happy to hear it."

"I think he will come again to make me a real Tsar."

"Your Captain will do it before him." Tobias tilted his hat and let all the apples fall on to the grass. "I shouldn't be able to enjoy my supper if I ate them now. Besides, they look more tasty up on the branches." He smiled and said to the boy: "Run along to your mother, Dmitri. She'll soon be going back."

"Yes, my mother . . ." Dmitri muttered and carefully placed the dagger behind his belt.

The woman approached the Captain when the cart was about to leave.

"I'll do everything you asked me to do, General." She bent to his knees as she spoke. "I'll take care of your load."

"It's not only mine. It's your son's as well."

"But you won't allow my boy to play with daggers and those big swords. He wasn't born to fight, my little falcon, he wasn't . . ."

"He won't fight, woman."

"Poor Saint Stanislas was cut to pieces by wicked swords. And I always pray to Saint Stanislas," she said with an irrelevance that seemed only an excuse for sobbing.

"Come and sit on the barrel, Barbara!" shouted Osip from the cart. Dmitri was not there to be angered by this familiarity.

On this day of departures, Captain Tobias Hume could not afford to worry about sentimental trifles. Dmitri had seen his mother, and the blubbing woman would visit him again to keep the pupil contented during the rest of his training. Later—well, many other things would decide what was to be done later.

On these other things he pondered as he sat in his saddle. Two of Setonski's men accompanied him on his journey into Muscovy. They were strong and obedient, but so unprepared for proper fighting that the Captain was relying only on his own wit. These two blockheads handled their muskets as if they were flails: in panic they might shoot him by mistake.

Tobias could now more than ever deplore the loss of his soldiers: yet his agile mind admitted no self-pity. The business at hand was lined with prospects as golden as the secret load he had so wisely dispatched by Osip, to avoid unnecessary complications in his final talks with Nikitin. The boyar had insisted on escorting his countrymen at least half-way to the frontier. It was his duty, he said, to fortify their loyalty to the Tsar, and this he could only achieve while away from the Polish meddlers.

Before his departure, Ivan Ivanovich had seemed very anxious to secure utmost loyalty from the Captain.

"I'll see them off, and you, Tobias Davidovich, will go to

Russia. Not far, but far enough to smell out some money. Should you reach my estate with your head still on your neck, you must round up my serfs, though I doubt whether you'll find any fit to be soldiers, and you must also hang my stewards, who, I am sure, have turned by now into shameless thieves. You hang them and grab all you can lay your hands on. Thus, with the Lord's help, two or three points of our noble agreement shall become flesh and gold. Otherwise, they'll become blood, and the blood will be yours, Tobias Davidovich. I swear I shall bewweep your memory in a truly Christian fashion, although you are a foreigner and a crafty man."

To this pious promise Tobias did not attach much affection, for it reminded him of the priest's obsequies, shrouded in the words *Nos habebit humus*.

So into Muscovy he would go. With a couple of Setonski's servants, and by a different route from that of Morozov. Tobias Hume knew from experience that the worst protection in Muscovy was to travel with a Muscovite, and therefore he made up his mind to keep at a safe distance from those new converts to the cause of the boy Dmitri.

His expedition was not the only one. Two other journeys were to be undertaken simultaneously with his. Father Stanislas would go to Vilna, and this time he wisely decided to be his own messenger. Seton-Setonski would travel wherever His Majesty the King of Poland had gone to perform his royal duties. Dmitri could not remain a secret for much longer, and the sooner the right people learnt about the Tsar's reappearance, the easier it would be to propagate his claim in both countries. Once the first emissaries had returned to Muscovy, more would follow their example and visit the Tsar in exile.

The men around Dmitri were forced to gamble for their

future positions. To watch one another in the manor meant to scheme behind the doors of chance. Outside in the wide world of influence and intrigue lay their battlefield. It was boundless and dark. The only lights over it were as yet pale and distant: the lights from Moscow and from Cracow.

Tobias Hume thought he had already secured a better position for himself. Dmitri had entrusted his gold to him, and Nikitin seemed very anxious to do the same. So one treasure was to be buried under Dmitri's cross, and the other unburied from Nikitin's estate. This appealed to the Captain's taste for paradox. After all, he was a man of two instruments: with his Great Machine he would destroy, with his viol da gamba create. And by a happy coincidence Seton-Setonski had shown some interest in both these aspirations. The first stimulated his Scottish curiosity, the second flattered his Polish benevolence. Thus Seton merged with Setonski in order to comprehend the paradoxical nature of Captain Tobias Hume.

Tobias had conceived a subtle idea. A man of wit and consequence should present great schemes in a manner both forceful and leisurely. That Seton-Setonski was a man of wit and consequence the Captain took for granted. While discussing Dmitri with the King, Setonski might be in need of a lighter subject to divert the troubled mind of His Majesty. In such an opportune moment he might perhaps mention a certain composition by a certain Scottish Captain, which the said Captain humbly desired to dedicate to the great monarch, renowned all over Europe for his accomplishments in the arts of war and peace. The composition was entitled *Musical Humours*, and could promptly be printed in Cracow, once King Sigismund had given his gracious consent.

The Captain, however, had omitted to mention a small

point in relation to his idea: namely that the lost manuscript of his *Musical Humours*—which he could reproduce without difficulty—had once borne a dedication to the King of Sweden. Tobias in the delicacy of his feelings knew that the King of Poland might not enjoy his compositions to the full if he learnt that they had previously been offered to his enemy.

"I trust His Majesty appreciates the genius of the Scots," were the Captain's last words to his host.

"I wonder," replied Setonski. "Our sovereign has heard too many complaints about Scottish pedlars. I have an uneasy feeling that he will again ask me to act as his adviser in this most tiresome matter. If so, I shall have to stop at Lublin on my way back. Unfortunately, you're not the only Scotsman in Poland, my good Captain."

Tobias Hume was certainly the only Scotsman riding that day along the wooded borders of the Pripet Marshes, eastwards in the direction of Starodub. Pine trees dwelt in this landscape, melancholy pine trees deformed by the vapours from the spleen of the earth. Spotty mushrooms bred in their shadows, and rotted in the humid air. Under the horizon lay the bogs, which the Captain likened to black bile affecting the humours of this sluggish plain.

On he rode with his men, silent, pensive, and hopeful. The servants, unmolested by orders, amused themselves as well as they could. When the master slowed down his pace, they walked by their horses, picking mushrooms. And at the sight of yellow mounds their faces brightened: they hoped to spy out a fox wallowing in the warm sand.

The Captain kept aloof. Once only he scolded the men for sticking mushrooms behind their bandoliers.

"Do you think you're going to shoot with them?"

"No, Captain, we want to eat them this evening."

"I trust you have some poisonous mushrooms"

"No, Captain, we crush every toadstool we see."

"Pity. You might get a chance of killing a Muscovite with a volley of toadstools."

"No, Captain, that would be sinful and ungodly," said the stupider of the two. Tobias lapsed into silence which endured the monotony of riding and the dull ditties of the mushroom-eaters.

The day they crossed the frontier promised little change in the habits of their journey. At first they did not notice that they had entered the domain of the Tsar. It could hardly be considered a domain worthy of any sovereign, for the few cottages scattered in the middle of unploughed fields showed no sign of life, and as far as the eye could travel there was nothing but the clouds and their shadows gliding over the scorched soil.

"The peasants must have fled from here," the Captain said, expecting no relevant comment from his soldiers of misfortune.

"You speak the truth, master. We'll find neither meat nor milk in this place," observed one of the men.

"So we must gather mushrooms," added the other, and the cheerful tone in his voice irritated Tobias.

"Hold up your musket, fool, and don't talk."

It was after a two-mile ride that they spotted another hamlet, and though smaller than the previous, it seemed to welcome the traveller with a glitter of cupolas from the church on the horizon.

The village was deserted, but they stopped there for the night, having filled their stomachs with whatever they could find in the abandoned fields.

At dawn the Captain's cry woke the servants.

"Get up! Jump behind the horses."

The sleepy men crept to their posts on all fours.

"Cock your match! In God's name don't drop your musket, you fool!" Tobias shouted in desperate frenzy, but a band of soldiers had already encircled them. Pikes and swords sprang forward from the advancing files. The Captain received a blow from the back and fell down between his servants, who lay flat on the ground, protecting their heads with the saddles.

When he regained consciousness he first saw a pig, tied by a rope to a horse's tail. The horse trotted behind a narrow cart which after each jolt sent a cloud of feathers up to the driver's cap. The white clouds came from a large feather-bed ripped open, and inside it something jumped and cackled. A hen, a duck and then two astonished geese popped their necks out from this sabre-inflicted wound. But they could not escape from the bowels of the feather-bed: an experienced hand had thrown them bound together in a flapping bundle of wings.

Tobias Hume turned his body sideways and realised that he too was lying on a pile of bedding. The cart on which he rested was chained to the cart with the looted poultry, and his only companion, as far as he could trust his groping hand, seemed to be a butchered calf.

A pikeman appeared between the two carts.

"Where do you take me?" the Captain asked him in Russian.

"No Russian," answered the man.

"Do you speak Polish?"

"No Polish," said the man.

"English?"

"No English."

"What language, then?"

"German," the pikeman announced with a broad smile.

Tobias Hume concocted a shapeless sentence in the tongue which he had always intended to learn properly one day. The sentence conveyed some meaning to the German mercenary. He answered profusely, but the only phrase which Tobias could grasp seemed to describe a rather big tree. The soldier illustrated his explanation with a simple gesture: he placed his hand on his neck and squeezed it.

"They're going to hang me," Tobias said to himself in some anguish.

The hen cackled from the front cart, as if to remind the Captain that he was not the only creature about to part with life.

CHAPTER VI

Crowned by a Raven

NEITHER pan Miechowski nor Alexey Petrovich Rukin bothered to preserve the illusion that the peasant Dmitri and the Tsar Dmitri Ivanovich were one and the same person. The mystical quibblings of Nikitin seemed to them entirely pointless: to believe in one soul possessing two bodies, or in one body lodging two souls, was of no practical use whatsoever. The tutors had to hurry and this now mattered more than all the subtleties of approach put together.

Dmitri had passed his nineteenth year: he had to grow quickly to make up for those five years in which the Tsar's life was richer than his. Miechowski and Rukin were helping the boy to absorb the flesh and blood of those years into his body. And Dmitri matured like a plant of the Orient: his seasons had the length of days. Lying awake at night he often measured the depth of the grafted memory: from the wooden house in Uglich to the throne-room in Moscow. He appeared to respond better to the blunt tactics of his tutors, particularly during the absence of Ivan Ivanovich.

Nikitin had cherished vague notions about the boy and he preferred to keep them vague. He carefully avoided seeing him alone, and seemed bashful whenever Dmitri addressed him in the presence of others.

The whole morning Dmitri practised the most difficult of gaits: the royal pace through the gallery of bows. His setting was the landlord's chapel and there, from dim recesses in the walls, every statue watched his steps, from

the altar down to the open door, until he was greeted by invisible banners of wind.

The tutors were not satisfied with every detail of his performance.

"He had a habit of stopping abruptly whenever his feet touched a gap between carpets. Now try the same, Dmitri," Miechowski said, showing the arrested motion with his thin legs.

"And Dmitri, don't look so pleased with yourself when you are near the door," Rukin rushed with his comment. "The Tsar, remember, had a gloomy countenance. But how handsomely he could smile on rare occasions."

"And for heaven's sake, lad, don't shuffle your feet like that old goat Morozov." Miechowski imitated the boyar's walk on the bare part of the floor by the font. He exaggerated it so effectively that Rukin burst out laughing.

Dmitri frowned, but was willing to repeat the whole lesson all over again. Suddenly, excited cries from the courtyard disturbed them. The tutors and the pupil ran out of the chapel and saw a group of servants gaping at something high above them. Their blue tunics were like shreds torn from that very sky they were staring at so hard.

"Our black robber is back! Look, look at his beak!"

"He's brought back his loot. Now, look! Can't you see? He's circling over his old nest. And the thing shines. Oh, it's so big . . ."

"Mighty strong is that raven of ours! Look there!"

The youngsters shouted, pushing one another, their heads tilted back, their legs bent. Dmitri was a better runner than either Rukin or Miechowski: soon he stood behind the servants, following their zigzag advance from the middle of the courtyard towards the fence by the orchard. At first he

merely saw a trembling glow over his eyelashes: then he spotted a black triangle to the left of the sun.

A raven perched on some transparent bough of light, shifting with the wind, deluded the eye, now swift, now motionless. The circles which the bird was drawing with its outspread wings burnt as soon as they closed and each time the eye tried to find a centre, a point within the lines, the sun consumed it, asserting its own supremacy over the skies.

The raven's beak weighed down and made its descent the more majestic. Lower and lower it flew, round imperceptible slopes, shaping a mountain of air with its black wings. Dmitri wished they would stop shouting and jostling so near him; he begrudged them their excitement, for this sign, he thought, was meant to delight only one human creature, only one pair of enraptured eyes.

The servants were now swayed by emotions stronger than astonishment or delight. The youngest of them choked as he spoke, his neck straining backwards.

"Blood! It's blood that shines!"

"No, it isn't blood," another voice interrupted, "it must be a red bit of . . ."

"No, no! Look now! There! It's falling. Into the nest."

A twisted object dropped from the raven's beak on to the brink of the nest: it bounced, slipped along the tallest pole in the fence and reached the ground. Dmitri raced with the servants, overtook them and pounced on the object in the grass. There was more dry earth on it than blood. And what seemed a drop of blood had a hardness that no finger could crush.

Dmitri recognised the ring with the red crown, his gift to the dwarfish boyar who had Saint Nicholas's beard and the golden skin of the apostles. The ring was returned with the

hand, to bear witness that the hand had not lost the Tsar's gift. Its small contorted fingers still guarded the stone that death could not claim as her loot, for what is the Tsar's remains the Tsar's possession, though it be given away. And the winged hunters of the skies—Morozov had told Dmitri—never fail to honour the Little Sun. They respect the one which is the beautiful eye of day, and the other which shines over the land of traitors and martyrs.

Dmitri sat up, his feet nailed to the ground like the blades of grass about him; without fear he held the small dry relic of loyalty and stared at the red crown. Behind the boy stood his tutors, watching. He was not aware that the servants had stopped talking, and he did not see them disperse in panic. Neither did he notice Nikitin's beard riding through the orchard on the other side of the fence. The escort was returning. Earlier.

"Uncle!" cried Rukin, leaving Miechowski behind. "Morozov, uncle . . . the bird . . . they know."

"Nephew, I had to do it," the boyar whispered, dismounting. "The old fox met that woman, the mother." He shunned, as always, from using the boy's name.

"That bird, uncle . . ."

"Oh, don't you remind me of this thing from hell. It followed me . . . us . . . as they say in songs . . . waited . . . kept pinching my food . . . and then, before I could bury the wretched . . ."

"But, uncle, his . . ."

"Yes, it fell off with his dagger. He was made of loose bones, Alexey, very loose. I only swished my sword once or twice . . ."

"Look, Miechowski! Uncle, we must first . . ."

"Yes, to the house! Quickly!"

The boyar strode past pan Miechowski, ignoring him,

and shut himself alone with Rukin. The slighted and bewildered Pole hurried after the first servant he spied out hiding in the hall.

Dmitri rose from the ground, glanced upwards, turned his whole body to the right and to the left, but on neither side of the sun was there a trace of those glistening wings. All the birds that nested near the manor, in the stables and barns, seemed to have vanished from the air, as if to show their respect for the plunderer of battlefields.

Had the raven come from a field of battle? Dmitri pressed the knuckles of the horror he was still holding. By tightening his grip he might perhaps force the secret from death. But the secret had the hardness of a precious stone. It only glittered. And the sparkling of the ruby set his thoughts aflame. Triumph and suspicion disfigured his mouth as he screamed to the ghosts in the deserted courtyard:

"I am the Tsar! I am a crowned Tsar! Listen to me, I am the Tsar!"

The ghosts Dmitri was summoning did not appear to proclaim him. Even those two whose presence he felt, the ghost of Morozov and the spectre of Dmitri Ivanovich, kept their vow of silence, taken in the Imperial palace of death.

"Morozov! Morozov! Little Saint Nicholas! I am your Tsar!" Dmitri shouted, running towards the manor. But the obstinate silence pronounced its verdict, in favour of suspicion.

"The escort . . . Nikitin! . . .' the peasant thought, 'I must ask them . . . Where is Rukin?'

Two servants tried to flee behind a chest as he entered the house.

"Lead me to Alexey Petrovich!" Dmitri ordered, and both men rushed blindly ahead of him, not daring to look back. They knew he still carried that horrible thing.

"Open the door!"

"Is it you, Dmitri?" Rukin's voice asked. The peasant kicked the door in reply.

"What do you want?"

Dmitri gave another kick. The servants were not helping him: they had run away. After a while Ivan Ivanovich put his head out.

"What . . ." he muttered. Dmitri did not allow him to say more. He grasped him by his beard and pushed him into the room. Rukin sat by a table, drinking.

"My uncle is back," he announced, glaring at the peasant stupidly.

"And Morozov is back!" shouted Dmitri, thrusting his knee into the boyar's belly. "He's come back to ask for the rest of his body."

Dmitri lifted up the dead hand and brandished it before Nikitin's nose.

"Do you recognise it? Can you smell your own foul sin? Why don't you look into my eyes? Why are you still alive? Ivan Ivanovich, I don't want you to be alive."

Rukin watched the scene in stupor. When he managed at last to make a gesture, it was only to grasp the jug, and, not knowing what he was doing, he drank from it.

"Nephew!" He heard a throttled cry for help.

"Miechowski!" Rukin shouted to the door without leaving his seat. Miechowski had already been informed of Dmitri's display of passion. The servants had stammered something about the dead hand and the kicking of the door.

"Dmitri, my boy, what is the matter with you?" Miechowski imitated the paternal approach of Seton-Setonski. In the landlord's absence he performed his duties, and one of them, the one he liked best, was to bestow fatherly favours and reprimands.

"Dmitri, my boy," he repeated. The sight of Nikitin roughly handled had a pleasing effect on the Pole: he did not wish to inspire Rukin with a noble example of heroic rescue. He had been slighted by both of them, and now it was their turn to be humiliated. The Lord God punishes quickly, heretics in particular. Miechowski, however, could not enjoy the situation for very long: the unruly boy seemed to be ignoring his chief tutor as well, and this was a dangerous sign.

"Why don't you answer me, Dmitri?" The paternal voice was now more squeaky.

The peasant released the black beard, dropped his macabre weapon to the floor, and, fixing his eyes on Miechowski, pronounced his first Imperial command:

"Take that traitor away, and throw him into a dungeon. He shall be tried."

"Will a cellar be good enough for Ivan Ivanovich? Of course, we have to remove the barrels first, Dmitri, my boy. Otherwise he might drink himself to death before you try him. And that would spoil the fun, wouldn't it?"

Dmitri now recalled what his mother had said about the joking nobles: he was being laughed at, a servant was being ridiculed at the expense of a Tsar.

"Don't you know, pan Miechowski," the boy paused, "how to address your Tsar?"

"You're doing well, Dmitri. You said it just the way he would have said it. To tell the truth . . ."

"Pan Miechowski," Dmitri interrupted, "you've forgotten how to address your Tsar."

"My Tsar?" An ironic smile still lingered on the Pole's face. "I am the King's subject. To tell the truth, I elected him to be my King. And as for you, my boy . . ."

"Shut up, you son of a bitch!" Dmitri shouted in Russian,

and, in helpless anger, turned to Rukin: "Alexey Petrovich, I am your Tsar!"

Rukin scratched his ear: he was still wondering whether the object he had seen brandished about was a singed club or Morozov's hand. He started when the peasant kicked the table, upsetting the jug.

"Open your big mouth!" Dmitri's fingers lay in the spilt liquid. He was bent over the table. "Say to me, say to me at once: 'Lord and Emperor of all Russia, King of . . .'"

"I shall, I shall, if you wish," Rukin muttered, drawing the jug towards his chest, still not getting up.

"Ivan Ivanovich, you should be on your knees by now," Miechowski squeaked, prudently keeping both hands close to his daggers. "Our Tsar is ready to bite. To tell the truth, I am very proud of him. Our labours, gentlemen, have been amply rewarded. So on your knees, noble Russian lords. I shall watch and correct your humble postures."

"How dare you, how dare you!" Dmitri staggered about the room, kicking whatever his feet touched, his glaring eyes in search of a friend or a ghost. "I'll teach you to obey me. . . . If I had but a handful of my soldiers . . ." he mumbled, and then, like a madman catching a glimpse of his last sane thought, he said suddenly in a very quiet voice:

"Where is my Captain? He . . . he would weep with me now over this poor dead limb. Ivan Ivanovich, have you also murdered my Captain? I must look for the raven tomorrow. When the sun, the little sun, is in the corner of the sky, I shall ask the little sun and the raven: 'Where is my Captain?' "

The Captain was asking himself where he was. During

five or more hours of sleep he had lost all sense of direction. The only hope of prolonging his life came, oddly enough, from the landscape, for he could see no trees on either side of the road, and what lay ahead of him, between two bare hills, promised a paradise of relaxation: there, as far as he could trust his weary eyes, grew nothing, nothing at all. Fire must have passed that way, from one burning village to the next, and consumed dry grass, corn, and every bush of negligible size. 'Fire is a noble element,' Tobias thought, 'it seems to be endowed with natural foresight. And it also hates all that sticks up or hangs down.'

The Captain then noticed that the changes in his more immediate surroundings were of a less cheerful nature. The hen did not cackle, the geese did not show their quizzical necks, and the carcass—his fingers moved quickly along the bedding—yes, the calf was also missing. The mercenaries had eaten them all. Except the pig. The fat animal still grunted behind the horse's tail, marching towards his death with a soldierly air of submission. 'When this pig is butchered,' Tobias said to himself, 'my turn will come. These ruffians might even sell my carrion to a hungry family, for there are cannibals in Muscovy.' Here the Captain recalled what he had been told by the Swedes about the outbreaks of hunger in the country of the Tsar. And he began to envy the pig its stupidity, watching the tail and the rope tied round it, with morbid fascination. 'This rope is too rough, the noose might not tighten at once. Surely they wouldn't be so vile as to use this one, the scoundrels. . . .'

The German pikeman gave Tobias a bony piece of meat, and said it had to do for the two meals the prisoner had missed while sleeping.

"No beer," the German added.

"The big tree?" the Captain inquired, repeating the same

gesture which the mercenary had so expressively used to illustrate the simplest type of execution.

"The big tree stands where the chief has his wooden cabin. He'll eat the pig." And the German grunted in case the foreigner had not understood.

The chief indeed had a cabin. Made of perches and roofed with soft twigs, in the Polish manner of encampment, it stood, as the German had said, under an enormous tree. The Captain could only guess its size by the overhanging canopy of thick branches, for he was not allowed to admire his splendid scaffold. The pikeman pushed him into the hut, saying in the best Russian he knew:

"Off with you, son of a whore!"

This farewell immediately became a greeting curse which the chief blurted out. He was sitting with his back to the entrance, engrossed in the opulent charms of two Tartar girls. The girls were collecting their garments, crouched amidst brass kettles, helmets, saddles and icons. Their smothered sobs sounded rather like the grunting of the pig which the chief was to devour in celebration of the hanging.

Experienced soldiers can swear in a number of languages, so the Captain was not surprised when the chief followed his Russian curse with a smooth English rendering of its general idea. Then he waved the half-naked girls away, using a homely abuse in Russian, with a strange ending which must have been in Tartar, Persian or some foul idiom invented for this particular purpose. The chief, still half recumbent, glanced sideways to see whether they were gone, and revealed the rugged beauty of his profile. Rugged it was indeed, for his nose, his cheek as well as his chin bore the deep marks of small-pox.

He scrambled to his feet when he received a roaring command from Captain Tobias Hume:

"Corporal Dick, stand up!"

"Captain! Upon my soul, Captain Humel!"

"Give me something to drink, man!"

"Ay, Captain."

"Those scoundrels of yours, Dick, bashed me on the head. And they starved me. And, Dick, you have a great number of new men."

"Ay, Captain, they're all new. Polonians, Muscovites, dull-pated asses from Germany, and Livonians, ay, the Livonians too."

"What happened to my regiment? Where did you send it?"

"This devilish land, Captain, sent most of them to heaven. Or to hell more likely, Captain."

"And the carts?"

"No ermine, Captain, no tallow. We lost the carts."

"Lost them, Corporal? I'll have you hanged for this." Tobias Hume realised that what he had just said sounded more like a joke against himself, so he gulped vodka from a jug and waited for more explanations. James Dick was adjusting his breeches, his pitted face both puzzled and glad.

"In a manner of speaking, Captain," he uttered with some embarrassment, "you were taken prisoner by your own regiment. And they would have hanged you, Captain, if that Livonian bear had sat here in my stead. Ay, they would have hanged you, Captain."

"But Ferguson . . . Blair . . . Leslie . . . and that whistling knave James White . . . and, yes, by God! the boy Gilbert from Montrose—what became of them?" Tobias paced the cabin up and down, bending his head under the loose twigs.

"Leslie and Frazer are here, Captain. But they're sick. And a few others are left. You'll see them, Captain, when you've eaten."

"The boy Gilbert," muttered Tobias, "he would have been eighteen this year."

After a hurried meal the Captain and the Corporal stepped out of the hut. It was already dark, and the German mercenary stood by with a torch. He grinned on seeing the prisoner.

"The big tree?" he said, lifting the flaming stick to the canopy of branches. Leaves sizzled when the torch licked the lowest bough.

"Where did you find him, Dick?" Tobias asked, pointing at the grinning face.

"He's our hangman, Captain. A kind and hard-working man."

A covered wagon stood at the end of the camp. Two fires glowed there, illuminating a standard stuck in the cart, and a sentry. The sentry was a Polish peasant, and the standard had a white sign whose intersected lines no breeze could distort. Tobias Hume saw again his standard with Saint Andrew's Cross: his lips quivered as he looked at it.

From the dim interior of the wagon familiar voices greeted him. He asked the German to bring the torch nearer.

"Leslie, my good man. . . . Frazer! Yes, I remember you."

"Ay, Captain, David Frazer from Perth."

A mutilated arm tried to make a gesture of welcome.

"And who are you?" Tobias asked a human trunk on a dirty heap of straw. A crevasse in a white lump of rags produced a hoarse voice:

"Allan, sir. I saw our best men die for the Tsar. I saw them, when I had eyes to see."

Corporal Dick nudged the Captain and whispered the

question he had had on the tip of his tongue during the whole evening:

"Where will you take us, Captain?"

"To Poland."

"We'll fight for the Polonians, then?"

"No, Corporal."

Three weeks later Tobias Hume was back in Poland with his soldiers. When he knocked on the gate guarding Seton-Setonski's manor, a servant shouted from the courtyard:

"Wait outside."

"I have eighty men with me. We are tired. Open the gate."

"His Imperial Majesty, Lord and Emperor of all Russia, does not wish to see anyone. You'd better camp in the field. The night is warm."

CHAPTER VII

Saint Simon's Day

I TELL you, Tobias Davidovich, he's the wrong man. His soul came from the blackest pit of Hell where the Devil himself sits perched on the sevenfold bough of the deadly sins in the likeness of a raven. The poor Tsar, who—alas!—is beyond the reach of prayer, was murdered while in the clutches of his mortal sins, and thus fell straight into the pit of Hell. Now can you understand my great agitation, Tobias Davidovich, for we are both in the Devil's trap. He, the Black Devil, released that poor soul from his eternal prison and dropped it on to these accursed bogs to delude us under the guise of a peasant. And we, two ungodly dupes, found a possessed man who will lead us to damnation."

"I admit, he must have been possessed in that moment when he hurled you into this cellar, Ivan Ivanovich."

"He didn't, foreigner, I locked myself up among these barrels, spiders and rats."

"You did?" With amused surprise the Captain looked at the boyar, who was lying on a soiled feather-bed under a small opening in the stone foundations of the chapel. Hardly any light penetrated through the dusty cobwebs, and the little that managed to relieve the gloom of the unkempt beard was doomed to perish, for three big spiders were busy weaving a thicker screen across the hole. Nikitin continued:

"I even begged one of those impudent serfs to borrow my nephew's halberd and watch the iron bolt day and night."

"You mean the guard outside?"

"Yes, foreigner. Miechowski persuaded him to oblige me. So I am a little safer now. The possessed man won't take me by surprise."

"Ivan Ivanovich, I am grieved to see you in this misery. And I wish I could be a harbinger of better news."

"Never mind my estate, Tobias Davidovich. The day the evil bird began to follow me I knew that all my riches were bound to turn into ashes. Pity, though, that you couldn't hang any of my stewards. The thieves, the ungrateful thieves!"

"I nearly got hanged myself."

"I remember, you told me. Pity."

The Captain wondered whether this last remark was merely the refrain of a despondent mood or a direct hint to the futility of further existence. He certainly intended to live on and play the game with chance. The success of the game, however, depended on his purse. Nikitin could no longer fill it, even with promises.

"Your Highness"—he approached the subject from the side of flattery—"I admire the wisdom and the presence of mind with which you prevented that woman, I am sure you did, from revealing too much. And Osip, I trust, was not there to babble nonsense."

"No, but I spoke to him later, and very harshly. I ordered the serf to marry that stupid woman and to keep her at home. Why do these Polish females go about so much? That wouldn't be allowed in Russia. Oh, no."

"It was a wise suggestion, Your Highness."

"You know, Tobias Davidovich, that day we met her she was on her way to the manor. Trying to see her possessed boy again. And she thought Morozov had come with gifts

for her son. 'Everybody gives him things,' she said to that sly fox, 'horses, silk, cloth of gold. . . .'

"What else did she say?" Tobias felt a cramp in his heart.

"Oh, nothing much. She babbled something about the boy's schooling, how he can read and write, and that the rich landlords load him with gifts because they can't read themselves and would like to buy the secret from him."

"And what else?"

"Well, then Morozov wanted to go with her to see such a learned peasant. And I said he should follow the dumb boyars who had ridden ahead of us during all that prattle. The sly fox refused and turned his horse to the West. And the raven appeared again. It smelt his rotting body, I tell you, foreigner, it smelt his death before my sword did. So I bashed his rattling bones with my blade and he fell to pieces like a mouldy mushroom. Then the black bird, sent by that possessed, tormented . . ."

"I know, Your Highness, you've already told me about the bird."

"Yes, well, that raven is his spy."

Saying this the boyar anxiously looked towards the cobwebbed hole. But an unexpected visitor came from the other end of the cellar where a grilled partition divided Setonski's store of wine from the vault that held his wife's tomb. Before Father Stanislas could grope his way up to the boyar's transient repose, Nikitin had time to whisper:

"He too, is after my soul, foreigner. Don't go, I beg of you. Every day he sneaks in suddenly like a rat to scare me with his Latin. And then he plays Romish hymns up there, for hours, he does, to confound my righteous faith."

"Captain Humus," the priest extended his arms from the darkness, "I've been looking for you all over your camp. You've brought a fine body of men."

"Good morning, Father. My soldiers are kept outside the gate against my wish. Rukin allowed me to visit His Highness. He said it was a favour."

"So you haven't seen him yet, our omnipotent young man." The priest's voice sounded more tired than ironical.

"No, Dmitri is still in bed. He sleeps late, they tell me."

"He will soon make a drunkard out of my poor nephew," Nikitin muttered from his heaving feather-bed. "Every evening he takes Alexey to the village and there they chase girls, shooting, throwing daggers after the men. And then they drink late into the night."

"He wants to watch my soldiers enter," the Captain said to Father Stanislas.

"And so you'll beat the kettle-drums in his honour." Father Stanislas sat down on the edge of the boyar's bedding. The Russian shifted nearer to the stones.

"Father, I serve those who make war."

"He won't make war, Captain. We're going to drop him. I am glad that this Russian gentleman agrees with the opinion of my religious superiors; he fully realises his mistake. Blessed be the light that illuminated the dissident soul which can still be saved. *Gloria tibi, Domine.*"

The boyar shuddered at these words and stared at the Captain, mutely begging for rescue. As no help was forthcoming, Nikitin ventured to clarify his point of view.

"That peasant is an evil man, and his mother must be a witch. She made me kill Morozov, though, God forgive my tongue, he was also a Devil-sent tempter."

The priest shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"I should prefer to word what His Muscovite Highness has just said in a less superstitious manner. The boy Dmitri is bent towards evil, I agree, for we all are. But his particular form of wickedness may grow into a truly perilous

monster, for he has already shown the first fang of heresy. Can you imagine, Captain Humus, what he told me when I returned from Vilna? He announced that he had had enough of my teaching—and you know yourself that I hardly had a chance to supplement your lay instructions. Anyway, the peasant said his mind was made up: he would observe both rites, the Greek and the Roman, and venerate all Muscovite saints in equal proportion to our most holy Catholic ones. This, he said, was a fair compromise, and he even dared to propose that I should spend a couple of years in a Russian monastery. He could recommend me to a monk he knew, yes, he said that . . .”

“Oh, most foul of all polluted tongues!” boomed Nikitin, and crossed himself with such a wide gesture that he knocked his fingers against the stone wall.

The bolt outside rattled: it was a sign for Captain Hume to leave. The King of Kazan, Astrakhan and many unpronounceable places had woken up and desired to watch the entry of his army.

“Tobias Davidovich, don't worry yourself,” Nikitin said on parting, “I've freed you from that terrible bond. Your instrument, Captain . . .”

“My viol da gamba?”

“Is that what you call it? A pretty name. I must give this pretty name to my dog, if ever I have one again.”

“What about my viol?”

“I burnt it, Tobias Davidovich, very carefully, and threw the ashes into the muzzle of the wind. Don't thank me, foreigner. I did it for our common good.”

“You burnt it? Ivan Ivanovich, I . . .”

“The Holy Ghost must have enlightened my murky thoughts. You see, foreigner, we had both signed a pact with the Devil. Or, if you prefer, I purchased the Devil from

you. Now the pact is no more, for I burnt it with the wood it contaminated."

"But it wasn't there! I took it out to improve my machine . . . the plans—oh, you don't understand."

"I understand very well, foreigner, and what I understand grieves me deeply. We are still tied up to the Devil's tail. Why, why did you write that evil thing in his black blood?"

"It was a dye, Ivan Ivanovich, a dye which peasants make out of . . ."

"It had the colour of the blackest raven."

The Captain banged an empty barrel and cried out:

"You burnt my noble instrument! I could soothe my melancholy with it, now that my Corporal has fashioned me a handsome bow. You've deprived me of the sweetest medicine."

"Foreigner, you must destroy those evil pieces of paper. At once. Our souls are in great danger."

"What do I care about this stupid agreement of ours? It's no longer binding, it's useless in fact. Quite useless."

The Captain was groping his way among the barrels, followed by Father Stanislas. The boyar still implored him from his feather-bed:

"Destroy that pact with the Devil, scatter the ashes, and make three signs of the cross towards the wind, remember, three signs of the cross. Tobias Davidovich, I beseech you!"

The priest turned to the Captain:

"The Society of Jesus, I fear, will not easily convert these superstitious heretics."

"And it won't get much support from the unbridled Dmitri."

"He must be dropped. Pan Seton-Setonski is waiting for us, Captain Humus. Prepare yourself for another journey."

"I don't intend to go."

"You haven't been to Lublin on Saint Simon's Day, have you, pan Humus?"

The Captain did not reply: he walked briskly towards the gate.

"To Lublin, then, you shall go, my friend. You shouldn't displease the man who—in this paradise of fugitives exercises some authority over Armenians, Jews, Scots and other *vagi homines*."

Father Stanislas blinked his eyes nervously, as if to suggest a further warning to the vagrant Tobias, abandoned suddenly by his angelic guide.

When the first ranks of the eighty soldiers marched through the gate, they made a splendid impression on the inhabitants of the manor, especially on those who dwelt in the servants' quarters. Footmen, stable-boys and kitchen maids had lined up along the walls, and now cheered the buff-coats, muskets, drums, and, most of all, the blue standard with Saint Andrew's Cross. These first ranks proudly stamped the courtyard with booted feet and acknowledged the cheers with flashes from their breast-plates. Two gloomy Livonians beat the kettle-drums in furious abandon.

Then came the German and Polish pikemen, some in battered helmets, some in Muscovite caps, but the greatest variety of accoutrements was among the halberdiers, who seemed to wear anything they had carried off as spoil, from trunk-hosen and red boots to long peasant shirts and bast shoes. Behind their ranks dust flapped its tattered pennons over a pitiable band which hobbled and limped its way amidst wagons, horses, cows and pigs.

The Captain of this Imperial vanguard stood before

Dmitri, saluting him. The peasant was staring at his obedient master with a wry grin on his mouth, a grin that could prompt words of abuse or welcome with equal likelihood.

"My true servant," he began in a voice that seemed to chant from the hollow trunk of a spectre, "where were you and my guard when the villains hurt me? Where were you when I wanted to punish the traitor who had murdered my loyal subject and friend?"

"I have brought you these men," Tobias said, disregarding the questions, which he thought were part of a staged situation; he pointed at the standard-bearer with his rapier.

"To whom have you brought them, Captain?"

"To you," Tobias answered bluntly.

"And who am I, foreigner?" Dmitri imitated Nikitin's intonation with a wistful glee in his eyes.

"You are the Tsar," Tobias blurted out, annoyed that the boy was mocking him in front of Micchowski and Rukin. The Pole and the Russian stood on either side of their pupil, Rukin on the right, the Captain noticed.

"The Tsar of what, foreigner?" Dmitri inquired patiently. "I doubt whether you recognise me, Captain. And some of the boyars who come here from across the Dnieper keep telling me that it was you who saved me and brought me into exile. How can I thank you again, my Captain, if you don't remember whom you rescued so bravely?"

"Lord and Emperor of all Russia, Great Duke of . . ."

Tobias took a deep breath and recited the list of titles.

"You've missed out Yaroslavl and Rostov. Do you wish to appropriate these territories, Captain? If not, I trust you will correct yourself now, by informing me which dominions are still mine."

The Captain bit his lips, and, boiling with anger, again

delivered the formal address. Had it been spoken by a foreign ambassador, it would have indicated one purpose only: a declaration of war on Muscovy.

With a peasant curiosity about the effects of disease Dmitri observed the pitted face of James Dick for some time, and, having heard the Captain's recitation to the end, he asked the Corporal to approach.

The Scotsman knew little Russian beyond swear-words, but he had mastered the Imperial titles to perfection. Moreover, he produced an additional piece which delighted the boy Dmitri.

"We pray . . ." James Dick rolled his tongue round the unfamiliar stresses, "we pray for a complete and glorious victory over all Your Majesty's foes."

"Foreigner"—Dmitri turned to the astounded Captain—"double this man's pay. I shall reward him myself in due course."

James Dick understood the word 'pay', and thought it an opportune moment to remind his Captain of a matter they had not yet discussed:

"Captain," he whispered, "you owe us six months' pay."

Tobias Hume eyed him with reproach.

While the meal was being prepared, Miechowski managed to exchange a few hurried sentences with the Captain.

"Are you with us, with me and Rukin?"

"I am with him." The Captain meant Dmitri.

"He's a cunning beast. Beware of the servants. They spy on us for him. Some of them carry daggers under their clothes."

"Splendid. I can enlist them into my regiment."

"But they're Setonski's men! We must talk to the landlord."

"I shall not."

"Morozov's hand . . . have you heard?"

"I know all about it."

"Captain, he frightens these stupid scrfs with it. They call it the Tsar's sceptre. Cowards!"

"He seems to have frightened you too, pan Miechowski, with Morozov's hand, or perhaps without it."

"You haven't displayed much courage either."

"The boy is mine," Tobias answered simply, and for the first time during his stay in Poland he felt that he had spoken with real authority.

October came and the Captain went to Lublin after all. He did so for Dmitri's sake. The peasant had insisted on seeing the landlord. There was always a tone of respect in his voice whenever he mentioned the landlord. Pan Seton-Setonski had gone to the King, and now, his first mission completed, he could undertake the second, the purpose of which—Dmitri elucidated to the Captain—would be to arrange a meeting between the Tsar of Muscovy and the King of Poland. This should delight the noble landlord, Dmitri assured Tobias.

Reflecting on the delights of dubious missions, Captain Hume persuaded his practical mind that their journey to Seton-Setonski might also be useful to the genuine Scotsmen in his mixed regiment. He was hardly in a position to help the invalid soldiers himself. He could not for ever trail their wagon behind his fighting column; and as there were better prospects of turning his company of eighty men into a full-scale regiment of five hundred or more, the Captain did not wish to weaken its military strength by keeping disabled veterans.

In a city as rich as Lublin he might dispose of them in a manner both honourable and inoffensive to his conscience.

So he delivered his burden on the eve of Saint Simon's Day straight into the more responsible conscience of pan Seton-Setonski.

The burghers of the city, however, had already done their best to wear out Setonski's patience by telling him how wicked, unscrupulous and persistent the foreign pedlars were. They were setting up their stalls in places and on days forbidden by the Guilds; they were pursuing customers into places of ill-repute, which no respectable merchant would enter unless drunk; and, what was more dismaying, they seemed to multiply inside their very packs and baskets: their number was even greater than that of their offences.

Ignorant of what Seton-Setonski's duties involved, Tobias urged him to launch a few more Scottish pedlars into this paradise of teeming vagrants.

"I am sure we could supply their baskets with practical yet inexpensive wares"—the Captain appealed to Setonski's purse with the vaguely royal plural—"and as for Leslie, my well-loved and respected sir, we could equip him with a modest booth which he could instal somewhere in this busy market-square. Leslie, you remember, lost his right leg."

"In the market-square indeed!" Seton-Setonski sat by a window in the Tribunal House, and outside that window a crowd of merchants, tanners, shoemakers and tailors bustled about, occupying that small area, Tobias seemed to think, with one anxious idea in their heads: how to make room for a mercenary soldier whom Captain Hume had just raised to the rank of stallholder.

"I am confident, pan Setonski, that, acting on the King's behalf, you could but give an order, and the whole matter . . ."

"Pan Hume," Setonski interrupted, "have you come all

this way to talk to me about pedlars? I've heard enough of them. If you want baskets, buy them yourself, and fill them with whatever you wish. But I should prefer to discuss the boy Dmitri."

"He is here in Lublin. I found good lodgings for him at a Scotsman's inn near the Cracow Gate."

"And Father Stanislas?"

"He is with pan Miechowski."

"And where is pan Micchowski?"

"He entertains the priest with his conversation. As a matter of fact, His Imperial Majesty did not wish Father Stanislas to see you alone, my honourable sir."

"Captain," Seton-Setonski lowered his voice, "I am not accustomed to evasive replies. Where are they?"

"In Lublin. His Imperial Majesty has chosen me to deliver his message to you. His Imperial Majesty desires to meet the King of Poland."

"His Peasant Majesty is an impudent man. And your insolence, Captain, deserves to be punished. Take me at once to Father Stanislas!"

"I have my orders."

"While in Poland, you will take orders from my King. And His Majesty has instructed me to send the impostor back to the place where he came from."

"Pan Setonski, you went there to fetch him. Have you forgotten our first meeting?"

"I too, have my orders, Captain. The boy Dmitri must be taken back to his mother. You shouldn't have brought him here."

"Wait till you see him."

"I am waiting for you, Captain, to show me the way to pan Miechowski's lodgings."

On the morning of Saint Simon's Day Seton-Setonski was

ready to receive Dmitri. He had already discussed the whole painful affair with the priest, exploited Micchowski's intimidation, and impressed upon the Captain the simple truth that the voivode's soldiers could be summoned, should he need further persuasion.

But Tobias failed to produce the boy at once. Dmitri had fooled the Scottish innkeeper and sneaked out into the city. The streets were noisy and throngs grew denser as the Captain elbowed his way towards the Castle Gate. He could not pass the Market Square: he turned back and waded through the human thicket which pressed him from both sides, making him tread along the gutter in the middle of the street. Not far from the Cracow Gate he traced Dmitri at last. His chanting voice came, it seemed, from under a stall, and there was a great commotion around it.

Tobias found himself amidst traders and tanners, and they would not allow him to move a step further. They shouted into his ears, praising their merchandise. He heard one word repeated, palmed, weighed and fondled: *sables*.

"Two scores of *sables*, two scores! Look at my green sack! Pull this silk cord and see for yourself! Feel its fur, buy forty, buy!"

"Only five ducats a skin, noble sir. You needn't go as far as Muscovy! Saint Simon himself would have ordered his winter fur in Lublin. Buy Saint Simon's *sables*! Two scores. . . ."

Tobias pushed the men with his fists and knees. "Let me get through. You won't squeeze any money out of me," he cried, trying to convince them that he was not a buyer. "Leave me alone, let me go!"

He managed to reach the people surrounding the stall where Dmitri was the centre of attraction. The traders giped at him, and the peasant abused them in turn, wrestling

with some obstacle. His voice, however, did not carry well, it was muffled and panting.

"So you wanted gifts from us, eh? Forty little sables, you said, no more. . . . And now you can't clamber out of them, eh?"

"What's going on?" shouted Tobias, and before he could get an explanation he heard Dmitri snarl back at the traders:

"You mangy dogs! Wait till my soldiers come. They'll teach you to respect me!"

"Shut up, yellow-beaked whipster, shut up! Who do you think you are? A bishop or a German prince? Get yourself a small fortune first!"

Now the Captain could see the boy. He lay between two stalls, covered with furs up to his neck. Their eyes met, and Dmitri made another effort to get up. Tobias jumped to him, pulled a box from the mound of sables, removed a plank or two, and helped the boy to extract his legs from a sack.

"Your Majesty," he whispered so as not to be overheard by the gapers, "we must leave this place. Don't argue with these fools."

"Captain, they sneered at me. They dared to . . ."

"Your Majesty, pan Setonski wishes . . ."

"And they refused to honour the Tsar with gifts, mangy dogs!" The peasant was ready to start a brawl, and with clenched fists he walked towards the men who were still laughing. As they noticed the Captain's rapier their laughter stopped; they made room for Dmitri to pass. The peasant spat at the booth behind him.

Tobias Hume somehow persuaded His Imperial Majesty to forget about the sables and the niggardly merchants. He gently guided him through the crowd. Observing the street with thoughtful eyes, Dmitri at last said without anger:

"Captain, I believed he was the richest of all landlords, and he isn't." Tobias understood that the boy meant Setonski.

"Yes, there are richer men in the world, Your Majesty."

"Not only in the world out there," Dmitri glanced towards the narrow passage under the gate, "but here in this city. I saw coaches and men on horseback, men in red garments with loose sleeves. I saw bridles that were chains of gold. And on the other side of this gate which can boom such beautiful hours, I watched a regiment ride under hundreds of wings. They were wings, Captain, I tell you. And their horses had red legs and red tails, yes, red, I am not lying."

The peasant chanted on, his hands lost in hesitant gestures. Then he halted and frowned. Standing against a niche in the wall he seemed more like a puzzled village saint than a man who was trying to sway the worldly passions of schemers. He turned his whole face towards the Captain and spoke shyly:

"And I think I also saw four kings and two emperors, for the people in the streets bowed as they were passing. And their servants carried handfuls of gifts behind them, they carried furs and more furs, and . . ."

"You saw Polish nobles, my good . . ." Tobias nearly called him 'boy', and this slip of the tongue made him nervous. But Dmitri took no offence and went on:

"And, Captain, a small foreign man with a basket came up to me and wanted to sell me a very sharp knife. But I had no money. Yes, I haven't any money, I must be poor. The man with the basket said something about other cities, even bigger and richer than this one, he said I would get lost in them. And without money I would starve in them, yes, he said so, Captain."

"Money . . ." Tobias echoed, and his thought at once reflected the bearded face of Nikitin and then a long, long row of baskets.

"Captain . . ." Dmitri paused, his fingers probing the depth of the recess in the wall. He tried to loosen a brick, scratched his finger and began to suck the bruise. As no drop of blood appeared, he smacked his lips with surprise. "I have never seen such a big city," the boy muttered, his mouth within his palm. "I am lying, this is the first time in my life that my feet walk in a town. And I am frightened, Captain," he confessed with the simplicity of a lost child.

His Imperial Majesty followed the Captain in meek silence. At the inn, he had a talk with the landlord. Now he did not object to being called Dmitri and 'my good boy'. This perhaps was due to the fact that they were alone, or maybe the paternal voice of Setonski scored once again a diplomatic triumph. When the peasant left the room with the landlord, pan Miechowski at once noticed the change: neither a mummer nor a cunning beast was descending the stairs.

Tobias Hume tiptoed to the Pole: they both shared the same anxiety.

"Captain, my good friend, if they ask us in Muscovy how and when we lost him, we shall tell them this: 'His Imperial Majesty fell on Saint Simon's Day. Sables choked him to death. He was defeated by the patron of tanners, by Saint Simon himself.' "

At this moment the boy Dmitri said to pan Seton-Setonski:

"I want to go home."

They did not know whether he meant his mother's house or Setonski's manor. And as they were not certain, they began to hope.

CHAPTER VIII

On His Own

WHILE Osip and Dmitri's mother still attended the mass after their marriage, three wagons pulled up in front of the chapel, forming a line with narrow gaps between them. From these gaps muskets were directed at the chapel door, their rests stuck into the moist earth. The pikemen took their positions on both flanks, extending the line of the wagons to the walls, so that no one could steal through after the service. Along the manor, by the trap-door over the cellar, and at every opening in the fence, stood the halberdiers, debarring any possible chance of escape.

This was Rukin's plan, and it had been carefully and secretly worked out by Miechowski, Captain Hume and Corporal James Dick. They had had nearly three weeks to do so, three drizzly weeks during which the peasant was being softened up before the appointed day of farewell. Idyllic and ceremonial was Setonski's concept of this farewell: with the lingering echoes of the wedding bell the happy mother would depart with her new husband and her son, and among the host's presents there would be the most generous gift a nobleman can offer: a few serfs to convince the peasant woman that she would be a real mistress on her free land, and that her precious boy would remain protected from stray mercenaries and Muscovite kidnappers.

And since the boy Dmitri had already developed a taste for vodka under the experienced guidance of that most sociable young boyar Alexey Petrovich Rukin, there would be a further safeguard against his restless thoughts; and a

regular supply of barrels from the landlord's cellar would, no doubt, keep that choleric predisposition under control, mingling all the humours into a placid temperament. For nothing is more docile in nature than a simple peasant, attached to his mother soil and his godmother vodka.

But Rukin's plan was different. Dmitri drank with him just before the ceremony in the chapel, and did so with such zest that the Captain had to lead the peasant to his place between the landlord and pan Miechowski.

The Captain's task in the plot was to stay close to Dmitri during the Mass and accompany him to the door, which, when flung open, would be the sign for his men to carry out the given orders. Meanwhile, inside the chapel pan Miechowski should act with ceremonious slowness while helping Father Stanislas to disrobe, assisted, unwittingly, by the pious Seton-Setonski.

The soldiers waited, listening to the tinkling of bells: the Mass would soon be over. In the hush of pulsing expectation Corporal Dick was pacing the square between the wagons and the lines of lowered weapons: every pike was set against the right foot, every hand was ready to draw a sword. Behind the carts someone whispered, moving from one musketeer to the next. It was the Livonian, who must have been entrusted with a special function that morning, since no beating of drums would follow the capture of Dmitri. His compatriot, a wild man from the Northern forests, had also left his kettle-drum on the ground, and was walking at the other end of the courtyard where the halberds seemed to interspace the poles in the fence. He too whispered to the soldiers.

When the chapel door was about to open, both Livonians made quick signs to each other, and then fixed their eyes on the dumpy wooden tower where Rukin was holding the

rope of the bell. The rope hung down to the ledge above the door.

With a sudden jog the door came forward, and from the widening breach three figures appeared simultaneously. Dmitri's mother held the arm of her newly-wedded husband; on her left stood the boy, his face swollen, with sickly pouches under his narrowed eyes. The woman kissed him on the cheek and withdrew a little to the back, expecting that the two men would embrace each other. Osip made a step forward and lifted his hand, eager to assume his fatherly authority, but Dmitri's lips did not touch the extended hand; they only parted as if to bite it.

Whether the happy group thought the strange array to be part of the ceremony, or immediately suspected an ambush, they certainly had no time to wonder, for above their heads the chapel bell began to ring, and between its sounds a shrill voice was summoning the whole estate to hurry with help: "Fire! Fire!" shouted Rukin and tugged at the rope with all his strength.

No order as yet came from the Corporal. His Captain gave Dmitri a push from behind, but the peasant was so stunned by the noise that he could not force his body to move. From the manor and the buildings around it people emerged and speeded towards the sounds of the bell. When the first men neared the wagons, Tobias threw a command in Polish: it was directed to them and not to his soldiers.

"The Tsar is in danger! Save the Tsar of Muscovy!"

And to make them act at once without thinking, he shouted a more precise instruction:

"Look into the cart, you'll find there what you need. Help the Tsar's guard!"

Invisible hands began to fling out hatchets, spades and hammers: soon they lay strewn about the wagon which

protected the right flank. Setonski's servants hesitated, although the weapons offered them were familiar objects which they knew how to handle in work and in brawls. From the tower Rukin tried to kindle their enthusiasm with a repeated cry: "Long live the Tsar!"

The first man to respond to it was Dmitri himself. He pushed Osip aside and looked up. Rukin greeted him with a violent pull of the rope: the bell swung up and released a volley of splintered sounds.

"Long live the Tsar!"

Corporal James Dick watched the doorway: his turn would come with the appearance of the man against whom this mutiny of serfs was being improvised, alas! with less success than was expected. The professionals were to take over once the peasants had changed into rebels.

And the man showed up at last. Either he had not rushed on purpose, or he had effectively been prevented from intervening by his brother nobleman pan Miechowski.

"Stop that noise!" Seton-Setonski shouted to Rukin and put his foot on the step from which the boy Dmitri was observing the swinging bell in bewilderment.

"Death to traitors! Long live the Tsar!" he heard a defiant reply. The tower was still resounding under the cloudy November sky.

The landlord placed his hand on Dmitri's shoulder and beckoned to the wedded couple, but Osip refused to follow his former master: pale and trembling the bridegroom clung to his better half, and the woman held his arm stupefied. Neither of them understood what was happening.

"Let me pass," Setonski calmly said to the Corporal. James Dick knew no Polish, but he realised that his was the next move. He gave two commands in German, the language of mercenary drill.

"Draw your sword," he said to the pikemen.

"Try your match." He turned to the men between the wagons.

Seton-Setonski shielded the boy with his body: the loose sleeves of his red coat swayed for a moment, the muscles under his wide belt contracted and threatened to explode through its weft. Several of his men picked up the tools from the ground. Were they to attack their master or defend? The answer came from two soldiers who were hidden behind the middle cart.

"Drop your arms!" cried both Livonians together. The servants dropped theirs, for what they were worth. Then the halberds began to fall down along the posts by the fence and the manor. The swords were not drawn, the cocks of the muskets did not move.

The first Livonian had already climbed on to the cart, and from this vantage point loudly announced:

"We want our pay!"

His compatriot added from below: "Brothers, don't fight for these cheats! Spit into their faces! Money! Where is our money?"

The Corporal sprang to the wagons, cursing; the battle array was breaking up at every point. Wherever it broke, the cry 'Money' shot up from angry mouths, and whether the cry was in German or Polish, Lithuanian or Russian, it had the same guttural accent of wrath. 'So they were planning their stratagem while we discussed ours, perfidious foreigners!' the Captain thought, looking round in bewilderment. Miechowski now stood near him, and next to Miechowski the priest was rubbing his small colourless hands. With meek smiles and gentle squeaks pan Miechowski was assuring the Jesuit that all his sympathy lay with "our most civil and magnanimous host".

"Captain, I pity you." He turned hypocritically to Tobias.

At that moment the Captain needed no pity but a saddled horse and a mobile screen of smoke to gallop along the track of his escape. James Dick, unfortunately, wished to astound everybody with his daring.

"Fight! Advance! Kill!" he roared, jumping between the wagons. Tobias prayed that the fool would stop: he shut his eyes when he saw Seton-Setonski stalk towards the gap where the Corporal was over-acting the part of a drunken Mars. And then he heard Setonski speak English for the first time. And he heard the voice of a born soldier:

"Away, you damned rogue! You thieved a sabre from a Turk, so use it like a Turk." Setonski gripped the man's hand and the sabre dropped to his feet. "Rascals and damnable knaves! I'll pay your money and have you all hanged."

"Long live our noble lord!" shouted one of the Livonians. From the cart came another cry, but it was hoarse and tired: "Fight for our Captain, men! Fight!"

Setonski looked inside the wagon and saw the mutilated soldier whose wrapped-up face was like the cycless mask of war. He spoke kindly to the Scotsman:

"You've finished with fighting, my good man. What is your name? How old are you?"

"Fifty, sir. My name's Allan."

"When I was your age, Allan, I put my sword aside and married. Twenty-five years ago I led a regiment of my own. I had the best Scots that served King Stephen in the Northern campaigns."

"I chased the Muscovites too, with good King Stephen, my lord. I was wounded at Velikie Luki."

"If the great King lived to-day he would ask you to eat at his royal table, Allan. He never sent his old soldiers with a pedlar's pack to roam the country. And you, Captain,"

Setonski extended his trembling arm towards the doorway, "you purchased three baskets in Lublin and left those miserable wretches with a score of scissors and knives. No, I beg your pardon, sir; you were generous with my alms, you supplied them with pretty buttons as well. But what will you do with this man Allan? No basket for him and no buttons. Will you leave him then at the first Muscovite monastery you'll have plundered, that he may beg in a tongue they would not understand? Ay, he can still speak, Captain. And he once saw the gates of Velikie Luki burst open in flames before the Polonian army. Put a basket over his sockets, Captain, it will make him forget the glory of his youth."

"I'd gladly die for my Captain, sir."

"You would, I know you would." The landlord turned his face aside. "But you'll die here in my house. I've had enough food for these rascals, I shall now spare some for a true soldier."

"My noble lord . . ." muttered the human trunk.

"Where do you come from, Allan?"

"From Saint Andrews, my lord."

"Saint Andrews . . ." Setonski paused, twisted his moustache and then bellowed at Corporal Dick:

"Hold your sabre better, man, when you point it next time at Colonel Seton. But there won't be a next time, Captain," he now addressed Tobias in Polish. "Tell me, what do you wish me to do with this red-haired lad?"

Dmitri stared first at the Captain and then at the landlord. From the hole at the level of the courtyard, a black tuft was thrust into the cobwebs and a wild voice boomed from inside the vault:

"Drown the Devil in the nearest bog! Drown him and save my hell-polluted soul!"

To these words of Nikitin hurried a sobbing plea from Dmitri's mother:

"Spare my little falcon, noble lords, spare the innocent lamb." Begging for mercy she trotted from Setonski to the priest, from the priest to the Corporal, and then back to the doorway. "General," the woman clasped the Captain's knees, "you're his master, tell the noble lords he means no harm. He's just a boy, my boy."

Father Stanislas lifted the woman from her knees, took her away from Tobias and, making a sign of the cross in the direction of Dmitri, whispered with embarrassment:

"Peace of God be with you. And, my good woman, pray for me, for the Judas that dwells in my soul."

The Livonians were beating their drums: they summoned the soldiers to form an orderly column. Money, they thought, should soon be forthcoming since so many tears had been shed instead of blood.

Rukin decided to abandon his post in the dumpy tower.

"You're a most inharmonious bell-ringer, Alexey Petrovich," said Colonel Seton, "I hope you won't mind staying as my guest for a couple of months or more. You should practise your musical art, with the permission of Father Stanislas of course, and I am sure that our good Captain will ennoble your ear with his musical humours."

When Dmitri was about to leave under escort, Seton-Setonski again referred to the Captain's music. He spoke slowly and at some length:

"When I told you that His Majesty declined your humble offer, I may have disappointed you a trifle too much, Captain. It wasn't the result of the King's displeasure. No, Captain. His Majesty, when I mentioned your instrument, remarked that in his untutored opinion the viol da gamba was particularly favoured by men susceptible to the dry

humour of melancholy. He said he occasionally suffered from this malady and did not desire to increase it in these dark times, disturbed by impostors and vagabonds. He also observed that the next four years, up to the end of 1610, will be sickened by the bilious fumes of melancholy. This he held on the authority of his temporary astrologer, who, I believe, is a Scotsman like ourselves, my good Captain. . . . But now let us do something about this overdue pay for your brave soldiers. By the way, I have encroached on your authority and told my strongest serf to give your Livonian bears fifty lashes. They disobeyed your orders, and this scandalised the Colonel in my simple rural soul. I also had my servants whipped, those, you remember, who picked up the hatchets. If they meant to defend me, they should have been quicker about it. Twenty lashes for each of them, enough to shake their slow wits."

The peasant Dmitri staggered drunkenly as he walked to Osip's cart. The servants gaped at him, lining the way to the gate.

"I am the Tsar, do you hear, dirty sons of bitches," he muttered repeatedly. Setonski's men bowed to the ground as he passed, out of mockery or respect, the Captain could not tell.

"Keep quiet, my son," Osip said when they reached the cart. He received a furious kick for this fatherly admonition.

The whole winter at the manor was, for Tobias Hume at least, uneventful. His international company of brigands enjoyed the placid months of hibernation and, in particular, their regular pay from the magic purse of pan Seton-Setonski, whom they called 'Our fierce Polish Colonel', with an affectionate respect that was not alien to their otherwise barbaric idioms.

The Captain had no fixed obligations to pan Setonski. One day, the landlord told him, he might perhaps escort a caravan of Scottish merchants from Lublin into the wilds of Muscovy, but that would only be required when trade with Russia had become normal. "And I trust you won't permit your soldiers to loot their wares," he added with a smile. "I had thought the Dmitri affair might help our honest merchants to retrieve some of the losses which they incurred during the Moscow uprising."

So the Captain was on his own, most of the time in a large barn, where he slowly constructed the smaller parts of his Great Machine. These consisted of strong wheels and axles, the latter being hollowed out for those fearful wicks he was to insert once the bottom boxes were completed. Late in autumn a wise old fisherman had collected for him samples of foul water from the most putrid bogs in the neighbourhood, and for three weeks Tobias experimented with ducks: he starved the birds and then watched them drink, each duck from a different pail of polluted water. Those which died after drinking determined the selection of samples, and the stinking pails were guarded in a special shed, until the day—the Captain thought with glee in his eyes—when they would dangle from the topmost scaffold of the Great Machine.

At times, when Tobias had his peevish moods, he reproached Seton-Setonski for the lack of sufficient supplies. Not enough sulphur, too little salt, too crude a type of gunpowder, he would complain, pacing the carpet near the green stove.

"Don't hold me responsible, my well-loved sir, if after its first collapse the instrument should destroy only three thousand Muscovites instead of the thirty I promised you."

"Make it collapse twice, dear Captain, and on two different battlefields in Russia, and the whole bare-footed army of Shuiski will be annihilated. And effect each collapse thoroughly, sir, at His Majesty's Pleasure."

Tobias spent more time with the priest than with the Russians: he had grown to like the scholarly temperament of Father Stanislas. The Jesuit never spoke of Dmitri. He preferred to discuss modern literature, of which the Captain knew little. Father Stanislas was composing a cycle of idylls, in Latin, of course, and with allegorical devices. He read them in fragments to the musical warrior. Tobias managed to translate the titles in his mind, because the priest dwelt on their sonorous beauty before reading the text. The rest escaped his comprehension. One of the titles he even liked, for it stirred weird associations in his melancholy thoughts. This title ran: *Mopsus —Or: A Lithuanian Herdsman Whipped for His Sins of the Flesh in the Village of Mogilnik.*

"There is a poet, in Zamosc I believe, who attempts to write idylls in Polish. I suppose he has already exhausted his meagre wit in Latin. He must be a sluggish versifier." And then the priest added as a sympathetic afterthought: "I hope no one writes in your crude vernacular, Captain Humus."

Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin—the Captain was sorry to admit—had become, by all accounts, a dullard and a bigot. He fasted and loudly repented of his alliance with Dmitri, praying in his chamber, a long distance from the chapel. The Romish demon, in his inscrutable attitude to Eastern heretics, had contacted an Orthodox monk in one of the villages across the Yellow Bog, and presented the boyar with a sorrowful icon of Our Lady: Nikitin accepted it without a word of thanks and then purified it with a frozen lump of snow. Now he had a reliable image to pray to.

Neither the fat boyar nor his nephew were much watched at the manor. In the spring of 1607 the Marshes changed into one giant lake and no sane person would think of escaping through the flooded area. Letters and messages from Muscovy ceased to arrive at the manor about the beginning of the year. Rukin's infantile scribbles were or seemed to have been all quietly intercepted. The young man drank solitary toasts to His Peasant Majesty, reciprocated, as he hoped, across the ten-mile extent of weeds and water.

A year had almost elapsed since the Captain's lonely march into Poland. Pools of water had diminished on higher ground, and swarms of gnats bred in the sun. Towards the end of May the first incident occurred. Nikitin went out fishing, and neither he nor his bodyguard returned. The priest feared that the expiating heretic had listened to the darker voices in his soul and drowned himself in a bog. A search began. The next day it developed into a thorough exploration of the near-by marsh, because an envoy had suddenly arrived with letters from Muscovy. They were answers to some notes apparently dispatched from the manor during the winter. The notes, judging by the answers, had borne the signature of Dmitri Ivanovich. Seton-Setonski mobilised all his servants to trace Nikitin. Poor Alexey Petrovich wept and drank in turns, for he was, as the priest said, "a truly affectionate nephew, a rare family specimen these days". The kind host allowed Rukin to supervise the search. And although many serfs were about him the affectionate nephew also disappeared.

Pan Miechowski could not be blamed for either of these incidents: he had gone four days earlier to his widowed mother, who was seriously ill somewhere in the woodlands of Lithuania.

At last the time had come for the Captain to employ his soldiers, who were slackening in their duties, no doubt under the influence of the damp, warm air.

Then Osip turned up as unexpectedly as all that had recently happened around the manor. Panting and moaning, he tried to describe the events which had frightened him out of his wits.

"He chased me . . . I climbed the oak tree, you know, where the bees . . . Then he climbed it too. And I jumped, hurting my poor knee . . . And that devil ran after me . . . through the forest up to the river . . . The boat, you know . . . God in his mercy . . ."

"I understand you speak of your stepson," Seton-Setonski said in his slow Polish.

"Yes, the devil-begotten brat of my woman. He's gone, honourable lord. . . . And I am not going back."

"Dmitri's gone?" Tobias Hume exclaimed.

"And the serfs I gave you as my wedding present. . . ."

"They're gone too, master. He promised them free land in Muscovy and big horses for their old mothers. So they joined his army."

"What army?" Tobias felt he had just missed his appointment as commander of the Imperial Guard.

"The army which the Russian gentleman is going to find I saw no army, General."

"The Russian gentleman. . . . What Russian gentleman?"

"The younger one, General. The fat Highness with the beard came too. But he only drank mead in that old hut, you know, where the other cross . . . The fat Highness did nothing, he chased no one. . . ."

"Rukin . . . and that stupid ass of an uncle." The landlord slapped his thighs in anger and turned to Tobias Hume. "Captain, if you have any decency in you, help me, help

us . . . obey the King! Divide your company into small sections and ransack every corner of the borders. And in God's name be quick about it. I am too old to wade through the marshes. Pan Micchowski . . . I wish he were still here."

"I can't split up my regiment. The scoundrels will get lost, run home or something. . . ."

"Take the risk, Captain! You're a soldier. Besides, you can give them a proper warning by hanging one or two before you start the pursuit. It always works."

"I'll chase the boy if you insist," Tobias answered, and shouted for his Corporal.

"And for heaven's sake, don't be a fool, come back here. Or I'll send the voivode's men after you."

Captain Hume had no time to say good-bye to his intellectual companion, Father Stanislas. The priest was busy teaching Osip the moral obligations of matrimony. He wanted the man to rejoin his wedded spouse. Osip willingly admitted he was a sinner, but maintained that to expose his miserable soul to a murder from ambush would be a mortal sin indeed; he preferred the protection of serfdom.

Tobias was now really on his own. He did not break up his column; on the contrary, he left them under the vigilance of ten muzzles on an islet in the marsh, a few miles away from Setonski's manor. He went by himself to Dmitri's mother.

The woman sat in her cottage under a wooden statue, adorned with the chasuble. She was not surprised to see the Captain. Her pale eyes looked at him with hopeful trust. As there seemed to be no chimney in the cottage, only an opening in the roof, stems of bluish smoke clambered towards the windless day outside, shielding the lonely figure from the mercenary world.

Tobias Hume experienced an awkward sensation of helplessness, facing that woman who trusted him despite her presentiments. She said quietly, without a trace of tears in her eyes:

"You were good to my little falcon, General. You didn't take him to the wars. And now you are the only kind Christian soul who can bring him back to me. He wasn't born to carry a sword, and he wouldn't kill anyone. You will bring him back."

"My good woman." The Captain fingered his hat nervously.

"I shall reward you, General, with all that I possess."

"A cow, for instance?" He regretted saying this: it was too cruel a mockery.

"No, the cow is not worth much for a big General who has so many riches. I'll give you gold, every shining piece of it."

The Captain jumped to his feet.

"You mean he hasn't taken it?"

"He left it all for me. It will be yours, General, when you come back with my little falcon."

"I'll try my best," said the Captain vaguely. In his mind he was already burrowing into that patch of ground under the cross.

He told the woman he would consider her offer while taking the air; the smoke in the room was making him cough. And out he rushed. The hillock had not changed during his absence, nor the cross. The Christ-towel looked as clean as on that memorable June day; the sun whitened it even better. Perhaps Dmitri had hung a fresh piece of cloth before his departure. But the Captain had no wish to reflect on the barbaric rituals of the bog people. He crouched and with his dagger began to slash the soft earth.

It was softer than he expected; looking closer he realised that someone must have uncovered the hole before him, in the morning or on the previous day. The Captain's heart beat as wildly as the kettle-drums of his Livonians. He dug with his hands into the ground. It receded into a cavity below, sucking his arm as lumps of peat crumbled under his thrusts.

Suddenly his fingers pressed into a weedy tuft. He tried to pull it aside, but the entangled mass seemed to cling firmly to its roots in the earth. The Captain's arm was now sunk up to its elbow. With his other hand he removed the loosened clods, making a hollow into which he could lower his head. He smeared his cheeks as he peeped into the dark channel, all the time tugging at the weedy obstacle. At last a heavy mass moved up with it, and he carefully drew his tense arm towards himself. The object was emerging, but when his eyes fell on it, his right arm jerked and slid back into the hollow. He was holding Nikitin's beard.

The world had not yet such greed and such courage as to force the Captain to dig further in search of Dmitri's sheets, which must have lain deeper, protected by Nikitin's body. Tobias Hume quickly covered up the hole: with terror in his mind he thought of the sly peasant who had murdered the boyar in order to have the most reliable guard over his treasure.

He staggered back to the cottage.

"Your face, General!" the woman said. "Have you fallen? The earth is still slippery after the rain last night."

"No, . . ." the Captain mumbled. "The cross . . . underneath . . . Someone must have . . ."

She smiled at him, as if he were a little boy, worried over some simple thing.

"It isn't there," she said, "Dmitri took the gold out. It's

in a safer place now. I buried it myself. Five feet underground."

"Where, where?" he almost shouted.

The good woman smiled again and waved her hand with gentle reproach.

"General, my most noble Lord . . ." The black embroidery on the long sleeve jostled before the Captain's eyes. "Bring back my little falcon soon, and you'll see your gold. I shall watch over it as if it were a holy icon."

The Captain glanced at the statue clad in the chasuble. The saint's right hand was missing. The woman noticed the movement of his eyes.

"Dmitri carved it during the winter. It's Saint Nicholas. My little falcon always prayed to him, but these last five months he's been his favourite saint, more even than Saint Stanislas, the most holy patron of our pious kingdom. Strange, though, that the careless boy forgot about the other hand. It must have been the wood that split there under his knife. And I kept telling him it was too soft for a big statue like this."

CHAPTER IX

Black Bile

THE melancholic vapours rose not from the marshy land, which was moist and hot, but from the dryness and cold that lodged in the Captain's body. He feared the gloomy dominion of black bile, and longed for the soothing medicine of his instrument—his musical instrument, that is, for the other he had wisely put out of his mind. His great instrument of war might, indeed, collapse so well that it would belch those odious fumes against the inventor himself, and then—Tobias Hume did not dare to think of his passions, out of control, released and still at large in the fateful moment of his death.

Black bile revealed its peevish purpose on the day when he learnt of Nikitin's murder. The wooden Saint Nicholas disturbed the Captain nearly as much as the black beard growing under the layer of peat. He was not a superstitious man: he considered himself to be the best example of the stoical Scot. And since, like all his mercenary comrades, he maintained that he was a descendant of Robert Bruce, the Captain had much in his nature to fall back upon. Out of shrewdness then, and not in a spirit of superstition, he drew out the four folded strips of paper which he carried hidden in his wide Polish belt.

The sketches of the Great Machine committed to his memory, there remained nothing else but to burn the pact, signed with three black crosses by Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin. This he did quickly in the kitchen and collected the ashes with utmost care. The woman was watching him in

reverent silence: she thought all this preparation signified the General's acceptance of her solemn offer. The Captain walked out into the yard with a handful of sacrificial dust, and scattered the ashes into the muzzle of the wind, just as the boyar had so earnestly advised. Alas, there was no wind, and the specks of the devilish covenant descended on to the heap of dung. The Captain thought it a bad omen. At once he recalled the academic moral of the Jesuit Father Stanislas: '*Nos habebit humus*, pan Humus.' Into stinking dung then we shall all rot, and the worm will feed on so ignoble a substance.

Thinking of the Latin line, he forgot to make the three signs of the cross which Ivan Ivanovich had implored him to throw into the purifying air. The next morning, when he remembered about his omission, it was too late to cross any wind, even the faintest breeze of spring. He had already left Dmitri's place, having kissed the rosary cross that was the priest's wisest gift. The kiss had sealed the promise: he would endeavour to bring the boy back to his mother.

Tobias Hume did not hurry to his soldiers. Their duty was to wait as his was to linger. By lingering he would give the wind a chance to overtake him, and the wind, though much delayed, might in the end transport those unblest ashes within the reach of his arms. And the Captain would redeem his and Nikitin's folly through the triple sign of the cross. So he walked by his horse, smelt the changeable air, watching the slender birches which he expected to betray the slightest approach of a sudden breeze. Often he sat on stumps, and for hours let his thoughts wander, caring little whether his horse was still with him. The animal grazed near-by, faithful to his master, patient and full of understanding.

They covered less than two miles a day, yet both, the man

and the horse, seemed exhausted at nightfall. The Captain had taken some food from the cottage, but he became absent minded about meals, eating only when hunger interfered with his mental habits: and the habits were those of a melancholy man.

Nikitin, dead or alive, had no notion of what melancholy meant, yet the Captain's fasting would have impressed him in any circumstances. This was perhaps the best form of expiation Tobias Hume had involuntarily adopted. Everything else ignored his moods. Birches and osiers stood still, no wind creased the clear sky, and the grass was too young to wear a penitent garb of dust.

One evening when the gnats compelled him to sit between two fires, the Captain thought of a new antidote and stayed awake the whole night in case he should forget it in his sleep. At dawn he added no more twigs to the fires, waited for the ashes to cool off, and then scattered them, running along a bog. How many signs of the cross he dispatched after them, he did not wish to know—it was for the wind to do the counting. But the obstinate wind refused to attend this ceremony. Its absence made Tobias try his trick over and over again: he burnt dry leaves, fallen nests, grass, bark and finally even the feathers which had adorned his hat, this last sacrifice being a painful reminder to his morose thoughts that all was vanity.

The horse grew restless and snorted at the mere sight of smoke; the Captain's activities began to puzzle wild animals as well. Should he perhaps offer one of them to appease the demons? No, he would not hunt. Tobias looked at his horse, and what crossed his mind at that moment was so wicked that he quickly mounted his noble steed and charged at the open space before his eyes. Nothing else seemed to matter now but to rejoin his soldiers.

The islet on which he had left them was empty. They had gone. Where? To return to Seton-Setonski's manor would be to admit his failure: the Captain turned his horse back into the green wilds and began to chase his neglected duty. Two more weeks elapsed before he found his regiment.

He must have appeared very haggard and scared, for the German pikeman greeted him with a macabre grin.

"The big tree?" the hangman asked, and looked round to see which of the pines would be good enough for such a delayed appointment with death. The German had never ceased to wonder why this strange gentleman who kept coming and going still evaded the rope. What in the Devil's name made the Corporal postpone the execution for so many months?

"The Corporal. . . . Where's the Corporal?" shouted Tobias from his horse.

The German grinned and placed his hand on his neck: this was what the good Corporal usually did to unexpected visitors. The Captain spurred his horse and galloped to the nearest hut. He startled James Dick, who was sharing his leisure this time with a Jewish girl, brought from the nearest inn to compensate for the lack of beer.

"Did they capture you, sir?" the Corporal asked.

"They?" Tobias echoed.

"Captain, you look hungry."

"I don't want to eat."

"You must be very troubled, then."

"Troubled?"

"Ay, troubled. But, Captain, all is well with us. The men have had their pay."

"What pay?" Tobias stared at the girl who was squatting in the corner of the hut.

"We took it out of His Majesty's purse. It was a fat purse, Captain."

"You robbed the King, villains?"

"No, only one of his estates in this Lithuanian dukedom where the lazy bear grows on trees, sucking honey."

"Corporal, you misbegotten . . ." Tobias stamped the ground and clenched his fist.

"We spared the steward, Captain, and he praised your name."

"How did he know my name?"

"I told him, Captain. First he abused us, for he believed we were some Muscovite brigands. Then I convinced the whining Polack that we served under a gentleman, and as I led him to a handsome fir he understood my Russian even better, and begged me to tell him your honourable name. Ay, Captain, the Polacks respect noble blood. He said he would write it down in his Bible."

"Write what, Corporal?"

"Your honourable name, Captain. I told the Polack you were of the best blood of all Scotland, and he said he would pray for you, looking at your name in his Bible. I spared his life, Captain, he was an honest old man and thought nobly of your soul."

"You told him my name and you took the King's money. . . ." The Captain spoke slowly, waving his hand. Sooty spots danced before his eyes and he tried to dispel them like evening gnats.

"Ay, Captain." He heard a proud confirmation which at once stirred the odious fluid in him: black bile was poisoning the arrows of anger.

Two ideas occurred simultaneously to the Captain: he would burn the wooden cabin and leave this false knave at the mercy of the preying winds.

"Go away!" he shouted at the Jewish girl, for he already saw flames surging about her and the Corporal. "Save yourself, run!"

When the girl hurried out, Tobias Hume grasped a pot from the earthen floor and hurled it at the face in front of him. The marks of small-pox seemed darker as the face lurched down, dropping from a ring of light into a shadow. 'I've missed the villain,' Tobias apologised to his bilious demon.

"Captain"—he heard a voice full of genuine respect—"honourable good sir, all is well."

And thus James Dick began his detailed report, in which he extolled his natural cunning, bravery, piety, and also the universal admiration for the Captain of such a steadfast regiment. Every messenger within five miles of the camp, the Corporal said, was caught and deprived of his letters, so anxious were the soldiers to intercept news from their great Captain. And two letters, Dick added, had remained unread, for he would never open what was intended for his superior. These letters he had with him, here, in one of his spare boots. Was the Captain satisfied? Could he, Corporal Dick, retire to see about a ransom for that innkeeper's daughter? "If the Jew has beer hidden somewhere, we'll drink it to-night."

"I have no taste for beer," said the Captain, fingering the paper folded into a cornet after the Muscovite fashion.

The first letter was from Rukin. The young gentleman expressed himself so poorly in his native tongue that Tobias could not decide whether the writing should be understood as a churlish exercise in abuse or an imbecile striving after a lofty style.

Rukin informed the foreign servant of His Imperial Majesty that the Little Sun had been, since the middle of

June, shining over all the bastards, dogs and whores of this ungrateful land where traitors are fathers of mangy bitches, and where, like the thumb of Providence, towers the Starodub castle in which he, Alexey Petrovich, was basking in the warm glory of the Holy Revenger. The Captain should come quickly to kiss the merciful hand of Dmitri Ivanovich, unless the foreign son of a bitch had already joined the Romish plotters, in which case he must, on receiving these happy tidings, hang himself on the nearest tree. The Tsar demanded dog-like obedience and punished every wicked thought hidden from him. The Tsar had already punished that impudent traitor Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin—the loving nephew wrote with righteous vigour—who deserved neither a prayer nor a spit of contempt. Was the foreign Captain by any chance, asked Rukin, still searching for his former accomplice? If so, the foreign dog should beg at once for a trial, which would be conducted in the same spirit of justice as that of Ivan Ivanovich. As for his noble self, Alexey Petrovich scribbled, he had a truly Christian faith in the Captain's honesty and invited Tobias Davidovich and his valiant soldiers to a cordial reunion at his camp somewhere on the way to Kozelsk.

Captain Hume was glad he was alone in the Corporal's cabin. Dusk curtained the narrow entrance and the corners were not cluttered with protruding objects that might at any moment pierce him from the back.

The second letter proved difficult to read. The writing was spidery and in two places leapt through smudged rings, no doubt imprinted by a goblet. Pan Miechowski communicated his news and thoughts in a civilised manner, of which the wine stains were a visible proof. The Captain managed to decipher the opening line and it struck him as very civil. To learn the rest he had to wait for light. A

soldier brought him a tall church candle, which, when lit, endowed pan Miechowski's greetings with a halo of purity. Tobias took this illusion for a promise of sweeter tidings and sent his eyes down the paper to discover, before detailed reading, whether the Commander of the Imperial Guard was mentioned anywhere in the letter. He found the word Commander at the bottom of the paper by the signature. It was the Commander-in-Chief of His Imperial Majesty's army who was addressing the humble Captain. No appointment of any kind adorned the polite intimations.

Pan Miechowski began by referring to that Muscovite cheat and liar—"you know whom I mean, dear Captain"—whose presence at Starodub surprised the truest and oldest friends of His Imperial Majesty. Pan Miechowski regretted that he had not witnessed that historic moment when the Tsar launched himself alone, facing great dangers. "As for that vile murderer of his uncle, I am sure he was the cause of suspicious rumours at Starodub which prevented His Majesty from revealing himself to his subjects at once on arrival. . . ."

Pan Miechowski did not explain how he had obtained his high post despite Rukin's presence. He only wrote about the brave Polish noblemen he had brought with him in hundreds into Muscovy. "I intended them to be the Tsar's vanguard, yet it was His Imperial secret wish to cross the frontier alone and in disguise; even I, dear Captain, knew nothing of it." The Commander-in-Chief was well disposed towards "our worthy friend, pan Humus" and asked him to employ his soldiers in a task requiring both speed and tact.

Here followed a list of noble names: the Captain should send them urgent messages on behalf of pan Miechowski. The Tsar expected neighbourly help from the Polish lords, and would reward them better than during his first cam-

paign, but the help should come immediately, since there were few soldiers available in the district under His Imperial protection. Like Rukin, pan Miechowski expected to see the Captain together with his valiant regiment. "Your men will receive triple pay."

Tobias Hume memorised both letters before destroying them in the candle flame. By doing so he achieved a double purpose: no spy in his camp would steal the secret papers, and no new pact with any demon would further endanger his turbulent mind. To the amazement of two sentries he performed his ritual with the fire and the wind. Having burnt the letters, the Captain rushed round the hut with a handful of ashes, then scattered the black remains, blessing the night with his right hand. How many signs of the cross he thus made the wind only knew, and what a relief it was for a man afflicted by melancholy—the wind at last tore through the clouds, followed by sudden rain.

The next day it rained more; all ashes on his penitent route along the Marshes were washed away; black bile retreated into its own indolence; there was nothing to fear.

The Captain asked for fat juicy meat, for it must have been his lean body that had succumbed to the attack of melancholy. From now on he would take care of his diet. Still pensive and a little sad, Tobias walked about the camp, trying to re-assert his authority over the wild Livonians as well as over the grinning hangman. To the German he said bluntly:

"You're more stupid than your big tree."

"No English. No Russian. No Polish," recited the German, trailing his pike as he ran away from the Captain.

This amused the Captain, and, strange though it seemed, Dmitri visited his thoughts, more like a clumsy peasant than a Tsar. 'So the boy is on his own too,' the Captain mused,

pacing amidst yellow puddles, 'he launched himself, after all. Behind our backs.'

Suddenly a hopeful solution occurred to Tobias: 'Well, if I persuade the boy to return to his mother, he'll have to annex the Pripet Marshes to his Empire. Why not? He's a shrewd fellow. And besides, he could make me duke of the bogs, and Seton-Setonski would be under my authority. I wonder, would Colonel Seton ever become a convincing Musco-ite boyar? . . . Still, with all of us around the Imperial palace in the Marshes the boy Dmitri and his mother could be together again, and they would live happily ever after.'

Tobias Hume did not stop at Starodub on his way to Kozelsk. He had passed small contingents of Poles, well armed, but not eager to hurry after the Tsar. Many villages were deserted and this meant scarce provisions for the troops.

"We shan't fight on empty stomachs. Nor will our horses neigh in honour of Dmitri Ivanovich, since he left them no fodder," a Polish Captain told Tobias. Another Pole whom Tobias met near Kozelsk assured him that the proper war would not begin until the hussars had shown their wings in Muscovy. "Those wings will raise a great wind, and the wind will drive the horses as far as the Kremlin."

Tobias Hume had no hussars, but his able Corporal appropriated a fair number of horses before the Polish noblemen had time to send their servants after loot. The Livonians were forbidden to beat their drums because the noise might scare away the few peasants who were still left on larger estates. James Dick managed to capture a dozen loitering serfs, gave them hatchets and javelins, and soon the new mercenaries gaped at the Scottish standard as if it were a miraculous icon from a monastery.

When Tobias presented himself before His Imperial Majesty, he commanded a band of nearly a hundred men; half of them were Russians. The presentation had a familiar air about it, though the surroundings hardly resembled the courtyard where thirteen months earlier the Captain had saluted the Lord and Emperor of all Russia. Dmitri was taking a bath in a barrel. A dilapidated cottage and a pile of logs sheltered His Imperial neck from the chilly October air.

Before his triumphant entry into the liberated town of Kozelsk, Dmitri had to put on armour, but he did not wish to carry such a burden for miles. He had ordered his men to halt here in the open fields by this spectre of a cottage. Bath-stoves waited for the noble lords in Kozelsk, yet the Most Noble Lord of all preferred to honour a crude barrel.

Into it he submerged his body and snorted like a colt, splashing hot water over his shoulders into the faces of servants, and further on to the robes of monks who stood with icons in a semi-circle. For the sake of these credulous monks the peasant staged a scene of welcome which, he knew, would not confuse the Captain this time.

"My true servant," the bleared face spoke through the steam, "where were you and my guard when the villains hurt me?"

Tobias Hume could have told the boy a weird story of scattered ashes and the absent wind, of black bile and fasting; such an explanation, moreover, would have impressed the monks better than the heroic tale he had to concoct. Yet he delivered his apology well, the lies about his escape from the rebels in Moscow sounded as convincing as the Imperial titles he had fired one after another into the cloud of steam. The monks found his foreign accent genuine, and supplied their own tears to the Captain's elegy on the death of the retreating Scotsmen.

Dmitri pushed his wet hand out; Tobias bent and plunged after it into the steam. Whether his lips kissed Dmitri's hand or elbow, or even the barrel's edge, was of no moral significance to the monks, for they had already witnessed all that the simple heart could desire.

The peasant granted his true servant another favour: the Captain was to assist him in the ceremonial dressing. Tobias thought it an excuse for a more intimate conversation. Dmitri, however, refused to be drawn into any recollections of the recent past. Only once he mentioned mothers, all mothers it seemed, not his own. They were to be pitied, he said, glancing now at his left now at his right shoulder-plate; pitied by their sons, who love them more than do their husbands.

"Osip is back at the manor; he abandoned her," Tobias ventured to inform His Majesty in a manner as casual as it was inoffensive. The peasant turned round, the steel shedding cold light, and threw a quick sentence at the Captain:

"When they have gold they marry three times, four times . . . six!" The last number he shouted.

"Your Imperial Majesty might perhaps one day . . ."

"Foreigner," Dmitri eyed him with irritation, "I think you are the kind of man who could marry someone else's mother. How much gold, foreigner, could your bought love melt in the thick pot of your heart? How much, answer me, Captain?"

"I . . . my duty . . . most generous Lord . . . I . . ."

Tobias Hume mumbled, feeling rather sick.

"Can you teach a bear to dance?" the peasant asked suddenly with a wistful smile.

"A bear, Your Majesty?"

"Not a stupid bear, Captain. Very clever. They tell me

he can read and write. But he should dance as well, don't you think, my old friend?"

"I don't understand. . . ."

"You will, foreigner. I have just appointed you Keeper of my Imperial Cage. If you fail as a music teacher—though they tell me you play many instruments—if you fail, I repeat, you can always dictate your own letters to the bear. And dispatch them too, without my knowledge of course. I am not as clever—your friends whisper behind my back—not as clever as that bear in my cage. See the bear, 'hen, and tell me whether your friends are right. I'd like to know before I march on Moscow."

Tobias Hume always thought peasant wit to be turbid and unwholesome, but this exhibition of rustic humour he found particularly distasteful, for it coupled Dmitri's low breeding with pan Miechowski's civil mockery. Yet the cage was not a figure of speech. When the Tsar ordered him to remain with only a few musketeers, and himself rode off with the rest of his regiment, the Captain realised that the joke was double-edged. Tobias would not enter Kozelsk with the Imperial Guard, though the town was so near he could see it from the road. Moreover, he would lose his reputation among his 'men by being known as the Keeper of the Imperial Cage.

Where was that contemptible cage? It rested on a cart, covered with coarse linen. The Captain told one of the musketeers to pull down the cover. Behind the rusty iron bars he saw Alexey Petrovich Rukin. The young boyar looked drunk, and bulged his reddened eyes at the light and at the men by the cart.

"Uncle," he muttered, staring at Tobias, "I didn't murder you, it was the Little Sun who killed you, he . . . the . . ."

"Alexey Petrovich, what have you done?" The Captain put his pale face against the iron.

"I must have become a traitor while drunk. Yes, I drank much, with Dmitri Ivanovich, uncle. Long live the Tsar! Death to all traitors!"

Tobias Hume began to shake the cage as if to bring the man within to his senses. Rukin shouted on.

Before the cover fell back on to the iron frame, the Captain sensed a mawkish odour in the dry air. Black bile was once again permeating the rusty cage of his body.

CHAPTER X

His Majesty's Displeasure

"I SHALL never write any letters myself. And I shan't deliver any of yours. This I only repeat out of respect for you, my well-loved sir: beware of the Tsar's anger! I am warning you, although it is treacherous of me to do so. If only the Tsar could hear. . . ."

"Come, come, my good Captain," Seton-Setonski said through a smile and leant against the chair, "we're in Poland, not in that snow-bound Orel of his. He couldn't frighten me, even if he sat on his throne. Besides, he won't get that far."

"He will, pan Setonski. Thousands are now with him. Not only boyars and peasants, but Cossacks, Tartars. . . . And I saw Polish princes too. . . ."

"Yes, one can see princes everywhere, especially when they tell you they are princes. Captain, you haven't tried my best mead."

"Strong mead inflames my blood. I mustn't give cause to fevers."

"Blood can be let, Captain, a simple medicine befitting a soldier."

Tobias Hume shuddered and clasped the edge of the white table-cloth. He would not talk of blood, whether shed or let, any running blood. Opposite the landlord, in the big chair that was once Dmitri's throne, sat the old soldier Allan, propped up like an Italian doll. War had inflamed his blood and then quaffed most of it. Tobias preferred not to glance in his direction, avoiding his eye-sockets,

black as the rest of his face, scorched by gunpowder. He seemed an exile Moor, stranded in this cold kingdom.

In contrast to the Captain's macabre fancy the invalid Scotsman enjoyed his quiet life at the manor: his face was no longer wrapped up; a servant looked after him all the time, and Polish food soon turned him into a great talker. His seat at the laird's table was a place of honour, and even the sudden visit of the Captain did not change his privileged position. Allan, however, refrained from talking in the presence of his former commander. The affairs of emperors and kings were worth listening to.

"I am supposed to provide an escort for you, should you decide to visit His Imperial Majesty," the Captain burst out after a prolonged silence, his hand still squeezing the tablecloth. "But, in the name of sweet Saint Andrew, don't accept his insidious invitation."

"Calm yourself, Captain. I am not going. Look through the window: who would travel while the snows are thawing? The winter has been very severe. Poor Dmitri, how uncomfortable it must be for His Bearish Majesty to hibernate at Orel."

"Don't mention bears, I implore you, my honourable sir."

"Not even dancing bears, Captain?"

"Dancing bears are kept in cages."

"Not as a rule."

"Yes, they are, my good sir. And then a cart with the cage is pushed into a river. Yes, it is. The bear drowns inside his iron cage."

"Your fancy, Captain, is somewhat giddy. It must be the air of Muscovy that thus affected your thoughts."

"Rukin, Rukin . . ." mumbled Tobias.

"I understand our boy Dmitri executed him for high treason."

"Who told you?"

"Dmitri wrote to me. Oh, yes, two nice long letters. He also mentioned you, Captain, saying that you were still his true servant. It was a great relief to me, because you yourself never wrote."

"I shall never write any letters myself. Neither shall I . . ."

"I know, I know."

"What else did he write about, pan Setonski?"

"Oh, he bestowed many favours on me, that grateful boy of ours. He said he would make me duke of one of his possessions in far Siberia, a distant cousin duke, you might say. I declined this touching offer, as I shall decline his invitation, sent by the word of your mouth, Captain. No Polish nobleman can accept a foreign title, you understand."

"He stole my soldiers, bribed my stupid Corporal with a promise of triple pay. He bribes everybody with promises."

"Indeed he does." Setonski laughed. "Dmitri, it seems, took a fancy to all of us, including Father Stanislas. He wrote to him as well."

"For more soldiers from Poland?"

"Oh, no! He's got Miechowski to transform Polish nobles into mercenaries, as long as pan Miechowski is alive, that is. His turn will come next, I think, before mine. I am not at Orel, as you can see, my good Captain."

"What did the Tsar want from the priest?" Tobias asked with great agitation.

"A trifle, it seems. Father Stanislas should go to Rome and persuade His Holiness the Pope that our peasant is not an impostor, the impostor's impostor, I should say. For this small service Father Stanislas would in a couple of years obtain either a cardinal's hat or the generalship of the

Society of Jesus. The choice, naturally, the boy left with our wise priest."

"Is the priest at Rome?"

Seton-Setonski replied with a roar of laughter.

"Where is he, then? You told me he wasn't here?"

"He undertook a literary mission instead. And not for the boy Dmitri either. As far as I remember we did not give the peasant any lessons on Latin poetry, did we?"

"No," Tobias answered gravely, perhaps regretting this omission.

"Well, Father Stanislas went to Lublin to have his idylls printed."

"I see," said the Captain with a spark of interest, for the mention of print reminded him of his own aspirations.

"Alas, the Jesuit fathers would not give their permission. They said the idylls praised divine love in too obscure allegories, whereas their presentation of mundane love was more than lucid. In fact, they thought it was obscene. Poor Father Stanislas, I noticed marks of tears in his letter. But he burnt the manuscript and had no regrets, so he wrote anyway. Burnt his beautiful Latin, what a pity!"

"And the ashes?" The Captain threw his query at Setonski in such a casual manner that the landlord asked him to pronounce his Polish more clearly. Tobias repeated his question, and its repetition evoked a picturesque scene before the eye of his fancy: he saw Father Stanislas, his cassock a whirl of folds, chasing the wind in Lublin, and above the priest's head hovered the black petals of his idylls, assuming rude shapes in their flight towards the Cracow Gate.

"My God!" Tobias exclaimed and stared at his astounded host.

Pan Seton-Setonski, when observed by a person less

susceptible to melancholy, could be summed up as a man of healthy disposition, remarkably strong for his age, amiable and tolerant. He still had an impressive bunch of grey hair on his square head, and it shot out, emphasising his Polish bearing. Nothing in his dress suggested his foreign origin. Even Tobias Hume did not fail to take note of Setonski's unaltered appearance. After a restful fortnight at the manor, the Captain began to envy Setonski his settled and independent life. The more he looked at his host, the better he realised how unsatisfying his own existence was, and that his prospects for the future had only hardship to offer.

One late afternoon Tobias approached Seton-Setonski with some reluctance to discuss a matter that seemed suddenly very urgent.

"Don't you think that I also look like a Polish gentleman?" said the Captain, inclining his head backwards, as if to hide the rusty colour of his hair.

"Not very much. You rather resemble the boy Dmitri. Of course, you're more handsome than our warty Emperor."

Tobias did not like this comparison; he shook his head and drove straight to the point:

"Pan Setoński, I ought to become a Polish nobleman."

"One doesn't become a Polish nobleman, my good Captain."

"You did. And, if you'll forgive my uncivil observation, I speak much better Polish than you do. Many Muscovites take me for a Pole—well, some of them. . . ."

"Captain . . ." Seton-Setonski hesitated, and then uttered very slowly: "You—dress yourself—in another language—and you think—you're a different man."

Silence ensued. The carpets on the walls were ponderous in their abstract cogitation. Outside in the courtyard thaw-

ing continued, the winter relaxed its tense muscles. Tobias heard a soft splash: loose snow had fallen from the roof. This gentle sound startled him. He said:

"Still, I could become a Polish citizen, at His Majesty's Pleasure."

"And you took the King's money, I suppose, at His Displeasure."

"You heard of it? I can explain. . . . Corporal Dick . . ."

"The robbery was mentioned at our local Dict. His Majesty had apparently been informed and asked for more details. His steward remembered your name, Captain."

"Will His Majesty pursue my soldiers?"

"They are with the Tsar, you told me. I don't think the King will make war against our boy Dmitri. He may, however, send the voivode's men after you. But the voivode doesn't know of your diplomatic mission to me, does he, Captain?"

"No, nobody knows. I'd better move nearer to the frontier," Tobias whispered, looking round the room anxiously. He did not hanker after Dmitri's protection: the borders seemed kinder than either the King or the Tsar. "I'll be my own master sitting astride the frontier," he said half to himself.

"Cure your melancholy there, my good Captain. Perhaps it is just as well that you won't be His Majesty's subject. You're both children of Melancholy, nurtured by day-dreams. He's already King of Poland and Sweden, though the Swedes predict wars from his dream; soon he may dream he is Dmitri. And should you settle in His Majesty's melancholy realm, he might perchance call himself King of Scotland. This claim, I fear, would not please your English neighbours, Captain, for their native disposition is not altogether devoid of passion."

"I don't remember much of Scotland," Tobias muttered absently.

The Captain would have sat astride the frontier for years, had not his humours remained in constant conflict. Until May 1608 he was busy transferring parts of his Great Machine from Setonski's manor to a clearing in a forest on the borders. The landlord viewed these activities with tolerant forbearance, and, when mildly interested on one or two occasions, he duly increased his supply of sulphur. At times he thought he might perhaps witness a really grand display of foolery before the end of his days. No other extraordinary amusement was likely to come his way. Even if he dressed a werewolf in sables and cloth of gold, no envoys would turn up from Muscovy to admire the performance.

The Captain, however, with an inconsistency characteristic of inventors whose hobby happens to be music, postponed the grand display, and did not appear at Setonski's manor to collect a special supply of giant nails. Tobias Hume had been persecuted by Imperial and Royal apparitions in his April dreams, and these purple nightmares urged him to abandon his lonely frontier post. 'I am waiting for you, Captain,' called one voice from a murky dream. 'Where were you and my guard when the villains hurt me?' another voice reproached him. 'Hasten to Cracow, Humus, and grab my silken purse, it's full of venomous toads,' murmured the personification of His Majesty's Displeasure.

After a succession of bad dreams came a shock from reality. Tobias would now and again call on Dmitri's mother to cheer her with feigned news from her son. But the good woman was ill-bred and never rewarded his services with a chip of gold. On Saint Stanislas' Day he did not find her at home. She had gone—where? Probably

on a pilgrimage, a serf explained. "She wore a black dress," he added, making the pilgrimage sound like a penitent journey.

Captain Hume imagined the worst and deplored female carelessness which leaves even family treasures unguarded. Supposing someone killed her on the way. . . . He had to protect her. The labourer surmised she had gone to Muscovy.

Like an errant knight loyal to his madness, the Captain fastened his weapon, mounted his horse and rode off in search of the defenceless woman. He crossed the Dnieper twice, for twice he changed his mind, rushing back to his hiding place on the Polish side of the frontier. The third time he nearly gave up his knightly purpose altogether, for when he reached Starodub he heard most disconcerting news. One of Prince Rozynski's men spoke to him rudely when he mentioned pan Micchowski, trying to impress a group of stingy burghers. The Polish straggler derided the Captain, saying that Micchowski had been a shameless scoundrel and that his master, Prince Rozynski, had now assumed all the powers in the army and was the Tsar's most trusted friend among the Poles.

"Pan Micchowski is Commander-in-Chief, don't lie to me, you mongrel of a soldier!" shouted Tobias, brandishing his rapier.

"That traitor was under a ban and fled from the camp."

"When?"

"Last winter."

"Where is he now?"

"In the crawling company of worms, foreigner."

"Who killed him?"

"I did," the man said proudly. "And my comrades helped me a little. We always obey the Prince's orders, we do."

"How did you catch him?"

"Miechowski returned to the camp, against the Prince's ban, to plot with other traitors he had left behind. He was found in the Tsar's quarters."

"In the Tsar's . . ." Tobias paused.

"He was killed in the Tsar's quarters," said the man simply.

It took the Captain nearly five months to reconsider his position at the Imperial Court, from which he had absented himself with an uncommon disregard for a quick career. No longer did he envy the Commander of the Guard his distinguished post, whoever the chosen man was at the moment; no longer did he desire to enlist more mercenaries into his regiment, whatever was its standing in the Russo-Polish alliance. Yet he felt a morbid compulsion, having come this far, to learn more about the Imperial form of Displeasure.

Late in autumn Tobias arrived at the camp near Moscow. The weather was cold and the sky threatened to divulge the white secrets of winter before its appointed time. At first he imagined that—in a sinister roundabout way—he had come to the Lublin fair, and was soon to rescue the boy Dmitri from under a mound of sables.

What he saw around him was indeed the greatest rally of furs, as if all the tanners of the world and Saint Simon himself had answered the war-cry of Dmitri Ivanovich. Furs lay on stalls, furs dozed in carts, furs walked in red boots, in white boots, furs embraced furs. The Captain was so confused that he did not take any notice of the familiar accents in the voices about him. As he entered a narrow alley of booths he suddenly stopped: his own name hit his ears; he heard it again, and once more, each time pronounced with lisping affection.

The good man Leslie hobbled towards him, and behind Leslie trotted other pedlars, all very willing to shower the Captain with their wares. Tobias did not particularly want to be reminded of the baskets he had bought for them in Lublin: ever since Setonski's oration in defence of disabled soldiers the Captain had suppressed three words in his quadrilingual vocabulary: pedlars, buttons, and baskets. Now he had all three back again in his mind, racing wildly, as he strained his ears to grasp what the Scotsmen were saying. Leslie spoke about a booth, his own booth; Frazer praised 'our good, kind Captain' to high heavens, pointing at something with his crippled arm; the other two men, whose names he had forgotten, were pushing small round objects into his hands. Tobias did not know whether he was supposed to buy these things or accept them as gifts.

Gifts were mentioned a little later, but in connection with Dmitri. The Captain asked where the Tsar's tent stood, and was told that a proper house for the winter was being built for him, and for the Tsarina too. Frazer complained that His Majesty had a habit of visiting the traders' enclosure with the sole purpose of collecting gifts, from foreign merchants in particular. The Scotsmen, Frazer said, preferred to withdraw their stalls from the centre of the area, because, being humble by nature, they considered their merchandise not good enough to deserve the Tsar's attention.

After hearing this, Tobias Hume spoke very modestly of his own financial means, and the objects in his hands were promptly taken back.

"Have you seen my man Dick?" he asked Leslie.

"I saw the Corporal last Wednesday. He's gone, Captain."

"Where to?"

"To those places where people pay taxes too slowly."

"Where?"

"Beyond the river Volga, that's where he was going."

"And the regiment?"

"The men went with the Corporal and his Polonian colonel. . . . Ay, the Polonians shout for their pay, and the Tsar shouts back at them. Soldiers keep coming and going, and only roubles stay at home. So the Corporal went for those roubles which don't like crossing the river Volga."

To reach the camp proper, Tobias had to pass through a grim place which must have once been a meadow; now graves bulged from its surface like mole-hills. A ramshackle mortuary rattled its door. As the mortuary stood near a wide road, leading to villages beyond the entrenchment, beggars and invalid soldiers squatted there, wailing at the sight of a cart or marching men. Tobias came closer, not to give alms, for his purse was almost empty, but because the memory of his old soldiers drew him there. He might perhaps find one of them, settled conveniently in the neighbourhood of death.

A woman in black, better clothed than any of these wretches, looked at him, shading her eyes with her hand. She wanted to say something, but her lips moved without uttering a sound. Only her hand dropped from her forehead and trembled in a begging gesture.

"You . . . here?" The Captain bent down and groped for his purse.

"General, great General . . ." She recognised him, trying to smile with her cracked lips.

Tobias began to ask her many hurried questions, about Dmitri, the camp, money, and her journey; half the answers he missed, because she spoke in whispers and the beggars were making much noise. Carts with provisions had arrived, and a few bearded men rushed to them from the

direction of a gate, gesticulating to the drivers. Instead of hearing the woman's story he heard haggling and whining protests. Someone was checking the supplies in a loud voice, stamping the road as he walked along the carts.

"Two thousand loaves of bread, sixty geese, eight sacks of salt. . . ." And from Dmitri's mother came a faint explanation, or rather fragments of it: ". . . used to say, my little falcon . . . The great Tsar could tell me where he is . . . Scidom rides this way . . . cannot run . . . tried . . . swift horses. . . ."

"Dmitri hasn't seen you, then? How long have you . . ." The voice from the road drowned the rest of his question.

". . . cheese! Where are the other hundred? Only thirty barrels of beer? Drive back, you dog! Fetch the fat burgo-master!" A sack fell to the ground and a curse exploded over it.

"General, if only the Tsar knew about my Dmitri. . . . I can't go back alone . . . all these months of walking, begging . . ."

"I shall see the Tsar. Now come with me. I'll find a place for you to rest. Over there. Where the merchants live."

The Captain took the woman to his Scotsmen. Leslie promised to look after her; Tobias in turn promised some payment—when, he could not specify. And he bought himself a warmer coat, on credit.

In this entrenched pandemonium of people, animals and screeching wagons, the prospect of a private audience with Dmitri was as remote as the distance from one end of the camp to the other. In fact the distances seemed the hardest obstacle of all. Before the Captain managed to extract a vague suggestion from a Polish lordling, he had already entangled himself in various commitments, to traders,

monks, grooms and even brothel-keepers, and they all had hopes that he would wangle something for them during his eventual talk with the Tsar. Bribes were openly offered, and he soon learnt the market value of each of the possible Imperial favours. Having no servant he had to go everywhere by himself: to the Polish and the Muscovite quarters, to the Cossack and the Tartar encampments; and as soon as he alluded to his acquaintance with Dmitri Ivanovich, bartering inevitably started: a favour for a favour, bribes collected on delivery.

The influential man, however, could not obtain an audience with Dmitri. No one among the higher-ups knew him; both Rukin and Micchowski were dead, and he was sane enough not to mention them while soliciting for help.

"A Captain without a regiment?" the Polish commanders would sneer at him.

"Why haven't you brought any mercenaries with you? A single foreigner is usually a spy," the boyars would insinuate, eyeing him from top to toe.

At last a Polish lordling took some interest in Tobias, out of kindness it seemed, for there was no other reason to bother about a penniless foreigner who had neither servants nor a store of wine, whereas the Pole had both, and much more. This vague young man regarded Dmitri as a vulgar upstart, whom he followed merely because his numerous cousins had done so earlier: the idea of seeking an audience with such a crude individual puzzled the Pole greatly, and instead he offered to introduce Tobias to a really exclusive circle in the camp which made a point of never attending Dmitri's banquets. In the course of the conversation, the young man suggested that, since the Captain insisted on seeing that wild bear, he should watch him bounce in the

open fields. "The churl actually goes hunting, which surprises me," said the Pole.

It was in the snowy fields and not in the crowded camp that the Captain finally met His Imperial Majesty. Yet even there, away from the guards, princes and scribes, even there, in the open space, Tobias could not approach Dmitri without initial difficulty. The peasant amazed him by his daring: he was driven in a sledge, escorted by only three Cossacks and a Tartar, and the purpose of the drive seemed to have nothing to do with hunting.

The sledge speeded towards the besieged city, which still refused to welcome the Tsar with bread and salt. Moscow knelt in the snow, but proudly, and its pride shone with gold on the cupolas of its churches, with gold in the sunlight, with gold on that ~~detestable~~ crown for which the man in the sledge was waiting.

"Why does he drive so near the enemy posts?" thought Tobias, unable to keep pace with the escort. "It's madness, they may shoot him or catch him alive."

Suddenly the sledge turned, made a circle and began to chase the leaping sun on the snow. It headed towards a cluster of fir trees and a hamlet beyond it, still a good distance away from the camp. The horses neighed and someone broke into a loud song. Tobias was sure the voice could only be Dmitri's. He tried to force his old horse to a quick gallop. He had to contrive a way in which he could attract the Tsar's attention. The escort never looked back to see whether they were followed; the sledge glided on with the same speed.

After half an hour the Captain found his opportunity. A stray wolf jumped from the bushes on the other side of the river and suddenly halted. Three more shadows appeared, their grey colour strangely warm against the

glaring whiteness. And the three animals halted also.

A shot from a musket resounded on both banks of the river: the Captain's horse skidded on the ice as he fired from the saddle. One wolf lay dead, the other three lowered their heads and tore through a thicket, escaping.

The man from the sledge was striding towards the patch of blood on the snow. The Captain dismounted and ran after him. Dmitri recognised Tobias, but no word of welcome or surprise came from his lips. Instead he hurled abuse after abuse at the man contorted in ceremonial bows.

"You swine, you smarmy whoreson, you foreign thief, you . . ."

"My Lord, My Most . . ."

"You've murdered a she-wolf, look! She was still protecting her young. They were stupid and frightened, didn't you see? You've brought a curse upon yourself—I should pity you, but your heart is too cruel, it deserves no pity."

"Your Majesty, I . . ."

"Their tribe will follow you for the rest of your life. Packs of them will howl after you every winter. . . . You already smell of the wolf-curse. Go away. You've brought bad luck with you. Don't kiss my hand, don't touch me!"

The same day Tobias saw Dmitri again, and later in the evening he was summoned to the Tsar's winter house. The reason for this unexpected turn of events came from a different source.

His Imperial Majesty had a quarrel with the leaders of the Polish forces. They demanded the money he had promised them. They had not seen their pay for months.

"Millions of zlotys you owe us, Dmitri Ivanovich."

"Is this the way you talk to your own King in Cracow? I haven't yet played cards with you, and I shall not be selling horses with you!"

"Impudent monster!" shouted a voice from the circle around the Tsar.

"And I shan't go to the bath with your wife, or bed with your daughters!" Dmitri shouted back.

Then, to annoy the nobles further, he ordered all poor women and children to be brought before him. The Tsar came out in his brocade robe and, despite the cold, he wore no fur cap or sables.

"I have little to share with you," he cried to the crowd, "but these are the roubles they sent me from Pskov. Take them, for I am your father and you are my best children. Like those shepherds at Bethlehem, you were the first to rejoice at my coming, before the princes and the rich."

He began to fling handfuls of coins at them with frantic gestures, shouting and stamping the frozen ground.

"Long live the Tsar!" he heard the women yell.

A black figure pushed through the cordon of guards and fell to his knees.

"Give me back my son, merciful Lord, he was not born to fight with a sword. Great Tsar, you have so many knights, spare him for his poor mother, send home my little falcon."

Dmitri turned his face aside, hit a halberdier who stood next to him and threw his whole body at the half-open door. He did not appear to acknowledge the repeated cheers of the poor.

"I am glad I didn't kill you," he said slowly to the Captain when they sat by the fire that evening. No prince, no messenger was admitted to the Tsar's quarters. The two men were alone. The peasant gulped vodka, Tobias Hume sipped wine.

"I shall take her home, Your Majesty, as you've ordered."

"She's grown old!" Dmitri shouted to his own shadow

on the wall. Then he kept silent for a long time. The stifling heat in the room made him drink more. Stripped to the waist he sat staring now at the fire, now at the Captain. His face had changed much: flabby flesh on his cheeks weighed heavily, distorting the line of his mouth, and even the warts seemed lost in the fat. Only the eyes were those of a boy who once adorned crosses with embroidered towels.

"She-wolf . . ." he muttered. "You must never see me again, Captain." The staring eyes became cold and distant. "In Moscow I shall build her a palace, a new palace. I shall give her . . ." Dmitri's head fell on to his naked chest: he began to snore.

The Captain nearly parted with life during his last night in the camp. He shared a new lodging with a glum boyar. The lodging, like many others, was dug out in the earth and heated by a stove, also made of clay and mud. The stove warmed the place well, and the boyar slept on it, leaving the rest of the spacious den at the guest's disposal. In the morning they were both dragged out by the legs. The Muscovite had suffocated to death; the Captain revived after a barbarous treatment he received from a physician of nondescript nationality: shivering and vomiting he waited for Dmitri's mother.

In the distance mortars were shelling; echoes abused one another. Tobias Hume left the Imperial camp with poisonous fumes still in his body, under a dull cloud of disappointment. When they had covered a few miles, the woman, who was not accustomed to riding, asked him to halt. She wanted to rest. The Captain agreed in silence.

All of a sudden the woman handed him a dagger.

"Take it. I am afraid to keep it on me."

"If you wish——"

"The Tsar gave his order."

"What order?"

"After crossing the frontier, I was to kill you with this dagger, General."

The Captain looked at her and said nothing. Dmitri with his mother—did they meet each other in secret? He wondered. "The she-wolf and the little falcon. . . . What am I—a beast or a bird of prey?"

CHAPTER XI

The Great Machine

MANY monsters inhabit the earth, but most of them copulate and hatch in the Pripet Marshes. From there some make for Scotland, intercepting those vagrant souls which after death travel by the low road.

Tobias Hume, surprisingly enough, was still on the high road, and exercised some control over his mind and body. To strengthen this control he declared war on the anonymous monsters in the Marshes. He launched a frontal attack by unmasking the anonymity of his foes. 'First name, then conquer!' was his order of the day, and the day somehow prolonged itself into a period of nearly two years, for very few frontal attacks succeed at once.

What sort of names could the Captain give to the elusive creatures that sneaked into his melancholy moods, only to vanish at the first sign of offensive action? Tobias maintained that he was not a superstitious man; he had also admitted to Setonski that his memories of Scotland were hazy: how then could he draw on the popular beliefs of his native land? For he had never heard of the kelpie, and would have abhorred it had he known that such a watery beast existed. No, Tobias was not a superstitious man. He therefore appealed to his Intellect, and the Intellect duly supplied abstract names and proceeded to arrange them in order of malice. This was the Captain's final list of monsters to be conquered:

1. Compulsion to Burn, Scatter, Chase, Bless, Etc.
2. Reluctance to Grow Beard.

3. Sitting on Stumps.
4. Sitting Astride the Frontier.
5. His Majesty's Displeasure.
6. Constant Transferring of the Great Machine.
7. The Werewolf of Muscovy.

The last name in this brief catalogue, he observed with surprise, had a ring of superstition about it. First of all it was not abstract; secondly it stood for something else which still remained hidden under a mask. When translated into plainer speech, item 7 plainly indicated the boy Dmitri, who—the Captain's Intellect was relentless—had also much to do with items 5 and 6.

In fact the whole list, in one way or another, could not have been compiled without the omnipresence of the man who was wielding power over the whole of Muscovy, save for a few stubborn and ungrateful cities. The same man kept asking Tobias from afar: "Where were you. . . . Where are you. . . . Where will you be next?"

And Tobias was answering His Imperial Majesty by referring either to item 4 or to item 6.

Yes, he sat astride the frontier and thought about how to remove the parts of the Machine to the place where he was sitting. And as he sat in many different places along the frontier line, Constant Transferring obsessed him so much that his Intellect advised him to shift item 6 to the front of the List. The Captain resisted this advice and tackled what seemed easier in the circumstances.

He challenged Monster number 1. He scattered nothing and chased no one. Blessing was excluded by implication. As for fires and ashes, he had to exert a strong will, lighting wood only when it was strictly necessary: on ashes he poured water, and thus the vicinity of a bog

or pond always determined the choice of a new camping ground.

The problem of beards, however, developed into a major crisis. Tobias had no time or means to bother about his appearance. In summer he wore clothing as odd as that which pan Micchowski had assembled during his first and only escape from Russia. Such rags almost demanded a beard, any beard, of whatever tinge and length. So the Captain let his hair grow all round his face.

The first beard turned out to be skimpy and juvenile in colour: with it sprouted the memory of Rukin. Tobias cut the ominous growth. The second beard he cultivated, rubbing birchen sap into his chin, scenting it with resin, poppies and wild strawberries. The result was magnificent but terrifying: he began to resemble Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin. The very idea of removing such a ghastly beard increased his fear: should he cut it or pluck it, or burn it perhaps? And then what? Bow in homage to the Monster of Scattering and Chasing? No, not that again: Tobias felt he was falling into a trap. Ghosts were closing in; black bile was announcing its terrible visitation.

Before he could make a false step—and any step then was bound to be false—rescue came from across the frontier. Peasant fugitives arrived one morning and found the Captain, Sitting on a Stump, deep in meditation. They took him for a local hermit, which was flattering, and offered to relieve him of worldly cares, which was convenient.

Tobias Hume had experienced much in these remote regions of Europe, but apparently not enough to understand the simple truth that by sitting patiently on a stump or a tuft of grass he could achieve as much as by running after emperors and kings. He acquired servants without looking for them; he could form a new regiment without

enticing recruits. All he needed to do was to sit, grow an impressive beard, and meditate.

The fugitives numbered five. The tribal origin of each of them seemed impossible to guess: the Captain gathered that they were all from Russia, and left it at that. The men had fled from religious persecution, yet what creed they themselves professed he could not tell. He asked if they observed the Greek rite, and they said it was the Devil's invention; he spoke of Rome, and they said it was built by the Devil; he mentioned Luther, Calvin, Mahomet and Buddha, and he heard that they were all the Devil's cousins; so in the end he gave up probing, and tried a direct question:

"Why did you come to Poland, then?"

"Because no one will ask us here about our religion."

"But I asked you."

"That's different. You're a lonely hermit, and when a hermit is disturbed after years of meditation, he asks questions."

This satisfied Tobias. The next morning the men disturbed him again: they cooked an enormous meal and, seeing that it pleased him, proposed the following arrangement:

"We'll work for you till the Judgment Day, and you must pray that it should come quickly."

The Captain said his prayers might not succeed in speeding up the wheels of Providence. As soon as he mentioned wheels, the Sixth Monster on the List urged him to action. Willing workers were under his command, why not use them for the noble task of Transferring? He told them about the Great Machine and their delight kindled his own interest in the invention. The peasants not only wanted to carry every piece of it to the spot he would choose, but begged him on their knees to erect the whole construction with their help.

"You say it will destroy thousands?" said the oldest of the five.

"Indeed it will."

"Could it destroy more?"

"I don't know, it might."

"A lot more?"

"It depends on the poisonous elements therein," the Captain uttered with simple dignity.

"Put all the poison you've got, holy man, blow it up, and we'll see the Judgment Day with our living eyes."

Tobias did not wish to commit himself to exact dates and figures; he preferred to secure the men's loyalty, to him personally and to the splendid object of his fancy. He warned them against the difficulties and risks the work would entail; he described in vivid words the possible consequences of His Majesty's Displeasure and with great caution alluded to the Werewolf of Muscovy. The more he frightened himself by recalling the monsters, the more enthusiastic was his pious audience.

He had, it seemed, found his apostles: they had fearless faith and were happy not to understand him wholly.

"We shall build your Collapsible Tower, because this is the only place where it can be finished, we know that." Again Tobias thought of the King's Displeasure.

"My enemies may interfere . . ." he said.

"In this land, holy man, no one interferes, we know that."

The Captain reflected on what he had just heard: perhaps this was why King Sigismund worried so often about his transitory subjects—Armenians, Jews, Germans, Scots, Tartars, Livonians, ay, Livonians too. 'For strange it is,' mused Tobias, 'how inconvenient tolerance can become, especially for a monarch who, like myself, suffers from

attacks of melancholy. And melancholy extinguishes the little love we have for human kind.'

He wished he could read the King's thoughts to comprehend the full nature of His Majestic Displeasure. The Captain had not much practice in reading distant thoughts, and also failed whenever he tried to guess what was going on in Dmitri's mind.

After a few months, however, his intuition was tested once more. The work on the Great Machine had already begun, and the Captain needed more tar and copper. He sent one of his men to Setonski. The man's name was First Scourger: in fact they were all called Scourger, and for clarity's sake used numbers, which reminded the Captain of his own List of Monsters. Since the monsters outnumbered his men, there was a flaw in the analogy, and this worried Tobias every night, when he could distinctly hear a regular rhythm of lashing.

First Scourger brought neither tar nor copper. And as Tobias had not dispatched a letter by him, pan Seton-Setonski also refrained from writing. Suspicion winked with its green eyes at Captain Hume. The landlord was obviously preparing an ambush. What should he do?—pull down the scaffolding or meet the challenge? News and gossip which the Scourger reported to him decided against Transferring.

The Captain heard of events that set his mind on fire. King Sigismund of Poland was now besieging Smolensk: his infantry, his hussars and his cannons were flung at Muscovy, inside which, as in a cage, two wild beasts fought, bleeding and roaring. Dmitri had apparently failed to capture the capital, and his Polish allies were already bartering with their King behind his back. 'So the werewolf slipped into a pitfall,' thought Tobias, 'and the Polonian

monarch has finally succumbed to his melancholy, dreaming that he is the boy Dmitri as well.'

No, there lay a subtler trap in this confusion of war: the Captain could not accept the news as it was reported to him by a credulous peasant. The King's Displeasure meant more, it forestalled greater dangers, for its hidden aim could be nothing less than the annihilation of Tobias Hume. It all made perfect sense. The King and the Tsar would come to terms; in the course of their secret talks they would naturally discuss the man who had displeased them both and, joining hands in a common purpose, they would march at the head of their armies towards the frontier post manned by Tobias and his five apostles. Yes, Dmitri and Sigismund would do everything in their power to destroy the Great Machine. Who was their arch-informer? Of course, one man only: that master of deceit, that benevolent giver of bribes, that Scotsman in Polish disguise—Colonel Seton-Setonski.

The Captain's intuition had passed its most difficult test: his heart and his mind were ready to withstand the attack. He would not be taken by surprise.

"Scourgers! The great day will soon come! I am counting on your devotion and courage. To work, men!"

His call was answered with a roar of rapture.

First Scourger in the excitement of his mission had forgotten to hand to the Captain a packet he had received from Father Stanislas. When he pulled it out from under his shirt, the Captain suspected the worst from its contents. On the wrapping he noticed a few lines written hurriedly in large letters:

"You have succeeded where I have failed and I would envy you, if my baser feelings were allowed to speak. This

packet was given to me by a kind Scottish merchant who had returned to Lublin from England, where, it seems, the people love music. Your immortality is assured. May God further keep you under His Protection, pan Humus!

Your sincere friend Stanislas."

The Captain opened the packet and found a book inside. It was his book, his music printed in London. Its title filled the whole page. His eyes rushed down the text and picked out what struck them at a glance:

The FIRST PART of Ayres, French, Pollish, and others . . . some in Tabliture . . . and Almains for the Viole De Gambo alone . . . some Songes to bee sung to the Viole, with the Lute. . . . Also an Invention for two to play. . . .

One line he read aloud: *Composed by Tobias Hume Gentleman.*

The peasant stared at him, thinking it was a pious invocation in the language of prophets. The Captain looked again at the date of the book: 1605. It had taken fate five years to make up its mind whether Tobias Hume Gentleman should see this glimpse of his immortality, or die in the Marshes unconsolated by the sweet promise of fame.

Yet even such consolation could not endure for long while foes and monsters were still at large. From the list of titles—and the list was most impressive—peered Melancholy, the Captain's mistress and muse. There she was, in the songs: *Death, My hope is decayed, I am melancholy, A Meditation*; and with her dry laurels she had crowned the most disturbing title: *Captaine Humes Lamentations*.

Suddenly Tobias remembered the priest's note: he had not read it with sufficient care. Its ending surely contained a word which could only be interpreted as a veiled warning. 'May God further keep you under His Protection.' This 'further' made the Captain shudder; the kind Jesuit was

shouting across the bogs: "Beware, pan Humus, Setonski is after you!" And the book, too, meant that death had already bargained for his body with immortality itself.

"To work, men, to work!" he cried out and speeded towards the wooden colossus that loomed against the clouded sky. Boxes on wheels, double bucklers, suspended ladders, revolving cages, windmill wings, boulders on cranes—all this fury of invention climbed up to heaven, exhaling most foul fumes. The Scourgers had lashed out of their apocalyptic imagination further devices which Tobias accepted or improved. Thus toadstools were dried, ground and mixed with gunpowder; bones from graves were planted in putrid water, splinters from coffins were scattered freely inside each cage and box.

The year was 1610, and the stars above it shone like the eyes of malicious beasts. The stars disappeared when the nights became misty in August. Then followed rain. And it fell for forty days. During that time the five men worked on, while the Captain wrestled with fever. He heard the rain and marching feet, thousands of feet, then the thudding of hoofs, and voices in different languages.

One word was always clear in each of them, clear in Swedish, Polish, Russian, in German, Hungarian and Livonian, the word which pursued him as he ran into the dark corners of memory. "Foreigner!" the Russian voice spat at him. "Foreigner," the Livonian voice cried for mercy. "Foreigner," the Polish voice applauded him. "Foreigner?" a question fell on his neck with a rope, held by a German hand. "Foreigner . . . Foreigner . . ." they all repeated, inquiring, urging and laughing. And the Captain also heard music which was played in the pages of his book. It always began with a Polish villanelle and ended with an almayn.

On the fortieth day the Great Machine collapsed, but not in the way Tobias had imagined. Waters surged up to the third level of boxes, pushed at the frame with suspended ladders, gushed through powder and sulphur, washed away the salt and sepulchral ashes: the whole tower made a deep bow to the wind and sank into the flooded morass. Whether the Scourgers drowned in the bog, or were crushed like rats by the collapsing scaffold, the Captain never knew: he had escaped in the nick of time, clinging to his horse's tail as it swam from the floating shed to a hillock on the other side of the frontier. The machine exploded its inventor back into Muscovy. And the waters swallowed its loot: scores of boxes, dozens of cages, two boots, one rapier, and also one foreign book.

For days he rode and walked, trying to find a decent house where he could rest and forget his illness. People avoided him, dogs barked at him, dark birds hovered above his head. At last he encountered a lame beggar who could not run away easily, and stopped him.

"What is the matter with the people in this district? They throw food to me as if I were a dog, and hide in their homes as I pass."

"There is death in the air, foreigner. Men drink water and fall dead, women kiss their children and the children wither away."

The Captain became very interested in this explanation.

"When did it all start?"

"Some time ago. I don't know when, I am a stranger here."

"Putrid water, eh?" said Tobias with glee. "How many have died so far, can you tell me, my good man?"

"I don't know. Maybe three, maybe thirty."

"Three only? Are you sure? Perhaps thirty-three?"

"Could be thirty-three."

"What about a hundred?"

"Could be a hundred," said the beggar.

"Three thousand?" inquired Tobias like a bargaining Turk, working out in his head the approximate distance from the place where the Machine had collapsed.

"Could be thirty thousand for all I know," the beggar blurted out. The Captain was delighted. He spurred his horse, trying to catch up another cripple. He met an old woman, who said she was not afraid of death and could talk about corpses for hours.

"Good!" exclaimed Tobias, anxious to verify his calculations. "Would you believe me if I told you that thirty thousand people died here during the last few days?"

"I would believe you, sir, you look to me an honest man."

"Well, what would you say to three hundred thousand dead?"

"That's a fair number and I take it."

"My good woman, I'd like to know exact figures. Thirty thousand or three hundred thousand makes a big difference."

"It doesn't to me, foreign sir, thirty would do just as well. I think I'll stick to thirty. One shouldn't look Death in the mouth and count its yellow teeth. Besides, I can only count on my nine—no ten—fingers . . . or is it nine? How many fingers have I got, noble foreigner?"

Tobias Hume was convinced that the Great Machine, despite its accidental collapse, had caused enough damage to satisfy the most sceptical of inventors. 'I have given the world a truly practical weapon which absorbs the four elements and then releases them with frenzy, confounding the humours of man and nature.'

This revelation made him both proud and calm. The

calm came from his firm belief that Black Bile must also have taken offence at his experiments and disturbed him with the aid of the Seven Monsters. Indeed, had he not nearly suffocated in Dmitri's camp, being exposed for eight hours to the poisonous fumes from that underground stove? And this, surely, must have weakened his natural resilience.

Dmitri's camp, yes. . . . The Captain knew exactly what he should do next. The boy Dmitri needed him, he needed the help of the Great Machine. Without it the chance of defeating both King Sigismund and the traitor Shuiski was plainly impossible. The boy, of course, would be reasonable, he would not kill the master of such a useful instrument of war. No, the little falcon was not a werewolf; he seemed only a trifle choleric but who would not be, in his position? At the moment, Dmitri's position—Tobias knew from hearsay—could not inspire envy in any would-be candidate to the Imperial throne. For early in the summer a Polish hetman had routed Shuiski's army and the King had an open road to Moscow. He would, no doubt, enter the capital before long.

'Poor Dmitri,' mused Tobias, 'he must be asking himself every hour of the day: "Where is my true servant, where is my Captain?" I shall build an even bigger Machine, two Great Machines, perhaps three, who knows. . . .'

The Muscovites did not think so affectionately of Dmitri Ivanovich. Tobias heard them speak of the Thief, the Whoreson, the Drunkard, the Antichrist. The Captain stood up to the ungrateful villains, his loyalty to the Tsar was steadfast, touching, if somewhat unpractical. For many burghers and boyars refused to give him provisions when he told them he was going to Kaluga to advise His Imperial Majesty on modern warfare.

In Orel, however, he scored his first success. Hunger was

raging in the rural district around the city. People were dying like flies, a fat merchant informed him, eating a roast pig.

"It's another outbreak of the plague, I think." The merchant gobbled his words with his food.

"Indeed?" The Captain proudly squared his shoulders. "Has it reached this far? I had not expected that my Great Machine would, after all, be so . . ."

The merchant was all ears. A new friendship was struck. The Captain finished the pig with the burgher, received the gift of a sledge with a feather-bed and two bearskins, borrowed a purse filled with roubles, and firmly, with the help of the merchant's barber, shaved off his Nikitin beard. He looked young, handsome, and very important.

"They might take you for a tax-collector," said the Russian. "Don't drive through hungry villages. The people drown tax-collectors as a rule. Especially foreign ones."

The Captain thought of Corporal Dick, but immediately dismissed his anxiety as ludicrous.

"I'll tell them who I really am," he remarked with great self-assurance.

"You'd better not, foreigner. And who are you anyway? I mean, with due respect, what is your name?"

"My name is Colonel Tobias Hume, the oldest friend of His Imperial Majesty. I have known the Tsar since he was a boy." Tobias liked the sound of his own voice at that moment; he liked even better the rank of Colonel which he had just awarded himself for his achievements in music and the new art of war.

"Don't forget about your promise," he heard the merchant say. "The Little Sun will gladly pay for the Hungarian wine which I managed to keep safe from all these accursed mercenaries."

In Kaluga he did not hesitate about the means he should

employ to see Dmitri without any delay. No more hanging about and bartering with intermediaries. He had a sledge, two good horses and fresh, keen wit. The Tsar would be driving in his usual fashion, with a small escort and far away from the crowd of wheedlers and schemers. And this time Tobias would not lag behind the Imperial sledge: he had a vehicle of his own.

He learnt from a local know-all that the Tsar had in fact organised a merry drive in the company of boyars, taking several hundred Tartars as his bodyguard.

"They will have sledges full of all sorts of drinks," the man said, "and the Tsar will hunt the hare, lying drunk in his sledge. They always let animals go just under his arm, so that he can kill them without stirring the vodka in His Imperial belly."

Tobias did not welcome the news about the several hundred Tartars. Yet his mind was made up: he would drive out to meet the boy Dmitri, drunk or sober.

Again the Tsar chose a road that led towards Moscow, but the elusive capital stood now a good distance away: his eyes would not be enriched by the sight of the golden cupolas.

In his swift sledge Colonel Hume was whistling a gay jig he had once jotted down during the Swedish campaign in Livonia. As it was a week before Christmas, his thoughts danced in a festive mood. 'Yes, I must include a few Polonian carols in my *Second Book of Airs*.' Tobias smiled at such a happy vision of his future. 'Truly the Polacks compose good music, though they don't know it themselves.'

The Colonel drove on, sprawled on a feather-bed like a true boyar; bearskins warmed his legs, one cuddled in his lap. The road was wide and the trees around, bent under

their ermine garments of snow, looked very Muscovite indeed.

Suddenly he saw a few hares leaping towards his horses. They scuttled along the runners, and soon a baying pack of hounds passed his sledge. Then several bearded men, on horseback and in furs, appeared and were gone in a flash, followed by a horde of yelling Tartars. They all seemed drunk, and they all hurried in the direction of the city. Tobias sat up and stared into the white space ahead: any minute now he would see the Imperial sledge. But he did not see any sledge, not even a solitary rider. The road was quiet. He speeded the horses.

After half an hour or so, Tobias Hume found the Tsar's sledge abandoned in a field by the road. Two men lay near it with their faces sunk in the snow. On the runners the snow was blotted with red smudges.

Tobias rushed to the sledge, his eye fixed on the overhanging edge of a rumpled fur. Spread out on a bier of sables rested a naked body, still bleeding. Dmitri Ivanovich, the Tsar of Muscovy, was dead—for the second time.

In panic someone had looted the Tsar's ring, together with his hand.

CHAPTER XII

Loyalty

THE head was half-severed from the neck, so he tied a crimson sash round it, the only relic of the Imperial robe he had found amidst the furs. Then he washed the whole body with snow and dragged it, stumbling as he walked, up to his sledge on the road. There he placed it on the feather-bed and covered its nakedness with the two bearskins. Now it could sleep during the long journey, in soft darkness, without asking the terrible question: "My true servant, where were you when the villains hurt me?"

He had been so near him, yet could not have saved his life, for the villains were many, and hundreds of sabres were clanging their treacher--

Tobias Hume went back to the field, upturned the bodies lying in the snow, and noticed that one of the faces was so battered and slashed that it had no features to claim its identity. The body had also been stripped of all its clothing. This nameless and wretched corpse he laid in the Imperial sledge. 'The city of Kaluga,' he thought, 'will for once honour death itself and not a gilded name. The boy Dmitri wore his mask well for more than five years: he deserves a quieter burial.'

Tobias mounted one of the harnessed horses and rode off with the catafalque on runners behind him. He kept his course to open fields, avoiding roads and villages. When he was passing by Kaluga, the city in the distance called out to him with every bell in its churches and gates. Westwards he rode, imprinting a smooth, two-lined track on the

funeral route along which no one wept, and the trees could not betray.

Yet, once the dusk fell, he was followed by eyes, peering from every hollow socket of the horizon. The eyes never came too near, but all through the night they shifted imperceptibly with the horizon. Wolves had joined the cortège of Dmitri Ivanovich. And among them—Tobias knew—were three motherless creatures, inciting hungry packs to revenge. He did not stop to make a fire; relentlessly he moved on, listening to the whispers of snow under the runners and the horses' hoofs. Darkness glided with him, crackling its frozen knuckles.

His courage faltered when the eyes appeared the next evening, and the evening after: the nights became longer, for he measured them with the beats of his heart, sleepless and watchful. He prayed for the moon, hoping that its light would outshine those bright specks lying in wait; but when the moon lifted the sky, terror resounded across the space above and the space below. The suicidal night was howling.

His own loneliness trapped him: only a human voice could break the nightmare.

Tobias Hume arrived at a monastery where four aged monks welcomed him with such a joy that he might have been their God-sent rescuer. They told him of some brigands who had robbed them of their greatest treasure: the body of a saint. They thought he might help them to recover it.

"I've brought a dead man in my sledge," Tobias said. "Let me take him inside your church. His soul is in need of prayer." Exhaustion overcame him, he fainted into the snow.

When he woke up in a dark cell, he heard singing and

then a loud cry which rose from the funeral chant, repeating "Lord, be merciful to me." Gropingly he walked towards the voices, until a yellow glimmer of candles showed him the way to the chapel. There in a silver coffin rested the body of Dmitri. The coffin was fixed to a pedestal which seemed to sway with the flames of the wax candles around it. And a pair of indifferent eyes watched over the obsequies from the golden frame of an icon.

Tobias came at the moment when the monks were about to place a lid over the sarcophagus: they held it in their trembling hands, for it was heavy and sharp at the edges.

"Don't bury him, he mustn't be buried here!" Tobias shouted. He upset a candle as he tried to climb the slippery pedestal. A shrill voice begged him from above to leave the corpse in the cloister.

"No pilgrims will come to us if the tomb remains empty. And this man has the likeness of our holy founder. Your dead friend, whoever he was, must have lived a saintly life. Leave him with us. He will be honoured and prayed for, he will sleep in a silver bed."

Tobias snatched two candles and shook them violently, stuttering now in Polish, now in Russian:

"Don't tempt him, don't tempt the poor boy. Don't ask him to be an impostor after death. I shan't train him for you, do you hear?"

The monks did not tempt Dmitri, but they bargained with Tobias Hume, offering him the heavy object which they still held suspended over the corpse.

"This is the only thing we can give you. We're poor and without him in the tomb we shall die of hunger. The silver will make you rich, foreigner, take it."

Tobias dropped the candles, their flames licked the stone floor and died out: the pedestal was now enfolded in thicker

shadows. Over these shadows four figures staggered, shuffling their feet on the marble surface. They were pushed back: the lid fell down and a deafening noise turned the chapel into a tomb of echoes. Tobias carried the body to the door: fear and anger gave him strength and he did not feel its weight, though frost had hardened it into a statue.

As he reached the sledge he looked back. The wind had slammed the door after him, and the moonlight was now rousing slender shapes painted on the wood. He saw the Last Judgment on the monastery's door.

For weeks he journeyed, stealing food wherever he could get it, changing his course whenever nightmares confused his sense of direction. What he saw around him in this enormous cage of winter was half real, half demoniac: in the end he accepted horror under every guise, for his mind was no longer able to combat fear with reason. Hidden, he watched peasants round up mercenaries: first they butchered them and then disembowelled them, searching for golden coins and croaking like ravens.

"The foreign devils swallow their loot and belch it out when they get home. Look, there it is, a smelly red zloty!"

He saw severed limbs carried on sticks like trophies by old women; he saw hungry serfs hang their icons on trees and then whip the painted faces, shrieking:

"We've prayed enough! And you lazy saints, you just glare with your stupid eyes and do nothing. Take war back to heaven or hell, take it where the Tsar God may see it better from his throne!"

Tobias Hume had one weapon only to defend himself against the enraged mobs. Whenever peasants ambushed him and tried to attack, he would merely point at the sledge, and so much cruelty must have been locked in those

dead features that no plunderer dared to rip up the body.

"Holy Mother Russia," Tobias would mutter, spurring his horse, "these are your pious children, have a good look at them, and bless with your icons the most prolific family of scourgers."

How they would slave for him, Colonel Hume, if he promised to erect for them a city of Great Machines! How well they would blow them up, one by one, with religious zest, singing a suicidal hymn in his and their honour.

He had still to pass the frontiers guarded by ghosts, the borders ransacked by the beasts of dreams. There nothing wore the flesh of life; all was waste and voices. And the voices spoke to him, claiming their loot which he kept hidden under the skins of bears.

"Tobias Davidovich, you destroyed our pact too late. Now he's mine, only mine. Burn his body, but do not scatter the ashes, do not make any sign of the cross . . ." Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin whispered, tugging at the horse's mane.

"Foreigner, look back, can you see what I see? It isn't a sledge you are driving; it is a cage, and he will soon call for you to keep him company inside. Can't you smell the vodka on his hands and lips? You will drink together and I shall join you, for I am very thirsty, foreigner." Tobias glanced at the other horse: a shadow was riding by his side.

"Rukin, I didn't push the cart into the river, you know that now, you must know that," he said and crossed himself.

Miechowski was last to speak. He stood on the runner, his thin legs like stems from which white puffs were falling off into the wind.

"Captain, my good friend, you should have allowed the serfs to take his body. To tell the truth, he was their own Tsar. I have an excellent memory, Captain, I remember how

they kissed his dirty boots and his saddle when he rode through villages. They loved him, you know, and now they're angry because their Little Father is dead. Sell His Peasant Majesty to the peasants, Captain, and they'll pay you at least fifty carrions for him. I always advised you well, remember? But you didn't listen. . . ."

Then the five scourgers danced about the sledge and whipped the horses, counting the lashes by thousands.

"Three thousand dead . . . seven thousand dead . . . thirty thousand dead . . . and each one is ready to witness the Last Judgment. We've come to build another big tower for you, holy man, we must hurry, for the Lord is mighty in his wrath, waiting at his mortuary in the Marshes."

By day Tobias could swear he saw wolves and ravens. The wolves gnashed their teeth as he tore off the bark from trees and chewed it to forget hunger; the ravens circled above the sledge as the horses neighed and kicked the snow. One morning he noticed two birds sitting on the bearskin over Dmitri's head, and threw his dagger at them. The ravens flew up and hovered for some time, ready to snatch the glittering weapon. Tobias drove in a fury, cursing the horses, the sky and the frozen carcass which invited all this horror to escort the hearse on runners.

After passing Gomel he rode on quickly to reach the Dnieper, beyond which he hoped to rest a few days. All was quiet at a ferry-man's hut: the river lay under thick ice; on the other side he could see the snow dotted with black specks moving about in a circle.

A small girl brought him a loaf of bread from the hut. She had a bluish kerchief over her fur cap, and this kerchief intrigued Tobias, for he saw white lines on it, distorted by folds and the knot under the chin. Willingly she untied it and spread her proud possession on a kennel, from which a

friendly dog appeared, sniffing the material. Colonel Hume recognised Saint Andrew's Cross. It was torn in places and the standard itself must have been cut at the edges to suit its new purpose. For all he knew, it could have been the standard of his regiment; its colour was faded and soiled along the creases. 'Even Corporal Dick would not be able to identify it,' thought Tobias. 'James Dick. . . .' His heart beat faster.

"Who gave it to you?" he asked the girl.

"Father. . . . He found it in a basket with a rusty knife and a few buttons. Father buried the body and took the basket, but he didn't take the man's clothes—oh, no, my father is not a robber. He buried him and put up a very nice cross."

"Was the man young? Was his face . . . ?"

She did not allow him to finish:

"I don't know. What can you tell of a man whom the wolves started to . . ."

"Don't say any more. I only wanted . . ."

"It's these stray soldiers again. They run away from Moscow because the Tsar is dead. Father told me to pray for his soul. He was a good Tsar, he gave six golden zlotys when he crossed the river many years ago."

"It wasn't many years ago, child."

"It was, noble sir, because I was very little then and we still had the old ferry." She looked at Tobias wisely and suddenly tears filled her dark eyes.

"Do you pray for the Tsar?" he asked.

She began to sob in reply, and, blowing her nose into the kerchief with the white cross, lisped almost inaudibly:

"I'll always pray for him. He was young . . . and good too, because he gave my father six beautiful coins."

Tobias Hume led her by the hand up to the sledge, and then he said in a trembling voice:

"Whenever you offer your prayers for him, always say this, which, I know, he would like to hear from your lips." Here Tobias asked her to repeat after him slowly:

"Lord and Emperor of all Russia, Great Duke of Vladimir, Moscow and Novgorod, King of Kazan, King of Astrakhan, Great Duke of Smolensk, of Tver . . . Lord and Great Duke of Ryazan . . . Commander of all Siberia. . ."

She chanted with him, holding his hand tightly, and her tears rolled down her cheeks, dropping on to the edge of a bearskin where the frost had left its own large tears.

Tobias Hume gave her six coins when she had finished her lesson and shown that she could address the 'Tsar with a sincerity in her lisping voice that no sly envoy or court flatterer might be able to simulate.

"They're not golden," he said, "I have no gold."

"I thought you carried treasures from Moscow in your big sledge."

"No, there are no treasures in my sledge. Only a shadow of the crown."

"Can one hide a shadow under a bear's skin?" the child inquired, and stepped back staring with respect at the oblong furry shape.

"Yes—in the fairy-tale that was his . . ." Tobias muttered. The girl touched his belt.

"Noble sir, take my kerchief, yes, take it, sir. You liked it as soon as you saw it, didn't you, noble sir? You must have a gift from me too."

"Thank you," he whispered and bent to kiss her. "You are giving me a costly present."

"My father will be sad not to have met such a noble lord as yourself, sir. He's with the merchants on the other side.

Stupid men, they're afraid to cross the river because their sledges are so heavy . . . loaded with all those shining things they sell."

"Greet your good father from me, child."

"I'll show him the money, he will be pleased. What else should I tell him from you, noble sir?"

"Tell your father that Dmitri Ivanovich has crossed the river once more. But he won't be returning this year, or next. He will never return."

Tobias Hume mounted his horse. The sledge started with a jolt and began to slither over the hardened snow. The girl skated after it, waving to Tobias, with her cap. And, to show the stranger that she had learnt her lesson well, she chanted happily to the trotting rhythm of hoofs:

"King of Kazan King of Astrakhan—Great Duke of . . ."

Tobias lost the echo of her voice as he went down the slope, sharply pulling the reins towards his chest.

The merchants on the other side of the Dnieper were still lingering, but not because they distrusted the ice. They waited for fresh horses; their load was indeed heavy, and the road ahead difficult. Most of them had come from as far as Cracow, but their hopes soared high: a Polish garrison kept order in Moscow and King Sigismund's son was proclaimed the new Tsar by the boyars. 'So the winged hussars have stolen all credit from my Great Machine,' thought Tobias. 'Strange that they should still win victories in their old-fashioned heavy armour, with those ridiculously long lances and tiger skins over their corselets. The Polonians are always behind the times, they don't appreciate modern inventions.'

The self-appointed Colonel had also won a decisive battle, but, like all victories, it left him exhausted, with a feeling of

uncertainty about the future. The immediate future, in particular, made him apprehensive. How should he talk to that woman about her son, what consolation could he possibly give her? And that peasant weeping and whining—he wished he could be spared the sight of her grief. Had he not experienced enough, had he not suffered greatly for her sake, had he not proved utmost devotion to the boy Dmitri?

No, she would not even think of such reasons, she would not understand his feelings, the risks he had faced alone, persecuted by spectres, beasts, and men.

Dmitri's mother did not cry when Tobias Hume told her of the boy's death. She stood in the yard, grey-haired and hunched under the burden of old age that had come upon her suddenly during that return journey from Muscovy. She listened calmly to the end of his story, kissed his hand in gratitude—and he had no presence of mind to withdraw it in time—then she approached the sledge, carefully avoiding the frozen puddles, and before uncovering the body said, almost apologetically:

“General, I must know how many wounds he received when the villains hurt him.”

The woman used the phrase which for many weeks had been pursuing him in the wind and snow. Tobias started and said nothing. She would soon pull the cover from Dmitri's head, and this he dreaded more even than her grief. The last time he had seen the dead face was centuries of fear ago, in that silver tomb, veiled by that yellow candlelight, under the murmuring of prayers. Should he be a coward and not look? No, something urged him to pay his homage again—the Tsar must be watched in the splendour of his death.

The skins slid down, the woman knelt, and thoughtfully

caressed his mutilated arm. She stared hard at the naked body, as if to memorise this human map of Russia, with its sword-cut rivers and the wounds which were his conquered cities, once bleeding, now healed by the frost. Dmitri's face was stern but no longer cruel. It had regained its youth, though the features had the precision of lines carved in wood. It was a face which resembled those on the painting of the Last Judgment which Tobias had seen on the moon-lit monastery door.

He knelt by the woman and looked at Dmitri in silence. He thought of the girl's chant in memory of the Tsar: how much can one prayer do, a child's prayer, what miracles it can work—it changes even the cruelty of the dead and shrouds each contorted feature with wise resignation. 'She will never grudge him the charity of prayer, as others will for centuries to come, calling him the Thief, the Impostor, the Peasant Knave.'

"Let us pray," he said simply, "may the Lord be merciful to his soul. . . ."

After the prayer he helped the woman to dress the body in a long embroidered shirt. They placed bark sandals on his feet, and covered his rusty hair with a fur cap. He looked his former self: no more the Tsar, but a young peasant who had met with sudden death in these accursed, pestilent Marshes.

Seton-Setonski had sent Dmitri's mother one of his serfs to work on the farm. The landlord was kind to her, she said. It was he who had urged her to try and find Dmitri in Russia. The serf was now making a coffin, seated under the oak tree. As he hammered the planks, lumps of snow were falling on his shoulders from the beehive muffled in straw and moss.

"General, I should go to the priest, and it is so far to go

over the bogs," she said, and no tears hampered her voice. The business of death was too serious for weeping: such a practical matter required clear thinking and no detail should escape the memory.

"I am not a general," Tobias said, thinking that perhaps after all these years she ought to know his rank, "I am Colonel Hume."

"Is a colonel then more important than a general?" She was visibly upset to learn that she had so often slighted her son's most noble master.

"Just call me Colonel," he replied, and added: "I took the body to a church. Prayers were said over him, many prayers, my good woman." Four shadowy figures appeared in his mind. He now felt grateful for what they had done. "Four monks lit candles for Dmitri," he continued, "and their chants were beautiful and long."

"Long and beautiful," she echoed and a strange smile rounded her pale lips. She could see those candles and hear the singing. "My honourable Colonel and great General,"—she preferred to keep the other title, it helped her to talk naturally—"if you say that four pious monks sprinkled holy water over my little falcon, that should be quite enough for the poor boy—holy be his memory—because he was a humble peasant, though free as I am. Yes, we had no landlord and no steward with a whip over our neck. The Lord God spared us much misery."

Colonel Hume still kept asking himself the same question: had she talked with him there, in the camp? Did she know that he was the Tsar? He could not bring himself to ask her bluntly.

The woman got up and went into the cottage. She came out after a few minutes and beckoned to Tobias. He followed her inside. There on the earthen floor, under

the statue of Saint Nicholas, lay Morozov's gift to the Tsar.

"It's yours, General," she said, pointing to the sheets of gold. "The Saint has guarded them day and night, my falcon's saint."

One thing he had forgotten during his sleepless nightmares: he never recalled the woman's offer and the kiss he had laid on her rosary. Now he remembered that among the spectres which visited the Tsar, one had not appeared: Morozov's ghost. Was he then saved and the others damned? If so, should he, the maker of pacts, seal yet another bond by accepting this part of the bargain? The sheets looked splendid, even here in this smoky room, on the unswept floor—they could make a royal breast-plate, they could perhaps cover a whole suit of armour. He did not know why, but he crossed himself three times. Then, lifting one of the sheets, he turned to the woman and said:

"It was a gift once, and it should remain a gift. Your son was meant to wear it. And he will wear it for a long time, for the putrid earth will not devour this noble metal."

At first the woman did not understand him. She was still puzzled when four hours later he went to the coffin and laid the golden plates under the body and over it up to the crimson sash on the severed neck. The boy Dmitri became the Tsar once more: the richness of his funeral robe could defy any Imperial or royal splendour—on Doomsday the lords of the world would make room for him on his way to the Throne of the Judge of Kings.

The woman felt the same pride as she watched Tobias bent over the golden statue in the coffin. She would have thanked him if she had known finer words of courtesy. Instead, in her simple manner, she tried to express her gratitude by asking Tobias about his home, his distant country, and finally, about his mother.

He stammered as he attempted to describe that "sunny rich country in the North where everyone has royal blood in his veins, where peasants dance and do no work, where soldiers live in such a constant peace that the only thing left to relieve their boredom is to go abroad, first joining a mercenary regiment and then following the prosperous profession of pedlars". But she insisted on hearing more about his mother. He stammered again, for he had a bleared memory of a small face with grey eyes which always expected some evil from the wicked world. And their world had been wicked indeed, for the family was persecuted and he, a boy of six, had left the country with his cousin and gone to Stockholm. All this he omitted from his account. He only dwelt on the nobility of his family, on the manors and riches they had once owned. In the end the woman made the obvious remark:

"You should go back and recover your riches, my honourable Colonel and most noble General. And you should take care of your old mother. She is still alive, I trust."

"I think so," he said vaguely.

"You told me about those cruel men who tore up bodies looking for gold. Who will protect your body, should you fall in battle? Who will, great General, take your body back to your mother, as you have done with my little falcon?"

Tobias Hume stared at the woman with such a wild despair in his eyes that she laid her hand on his, and he saw she had tears on her face. They were shed not for her son, but for the other woman whose grief she understood.

"I'll help the man to carry the coffin," Tobias said, his hands trembling with emotion. The serf had already hacked the frozen earth with an axe and a shallow grave was ready under the cross by the birches. They placed the coffin in it and stood in silence.

Tobias had brought the girl's kerchief with him. Now, as the last moment of the burial came, he climbed the cross and hung the standard with the Scottish emblem on its snowy arm.

"It is a nice piece of cloth," the woman said from under the cross.

"Many brave men died for this piece of cloth. Some died for your son too. And Dmitri, I remember, liked our blue ensign—yes, he liked its cross."

As he stood balancing his feet on a slippery nail, he finally asked her the question which had so often perturbed him during the last two years:

"Did the Tsar speak to you?" he said, bending lower, so that she could hear him distinctly.

"Oh, no, General, the Tsar was a cruel man. He didn't give me back my boy. The Tsar had no heart for a mother's grief. His cruelty must have offended God and Saint Nicholas, the holy patron of the Muscovites."

Tobias slid down the pole and began to throw lumps of snow over the coffin.

And thus they buried the peasant Dmitri under his favourite cross, two feet above the body of Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin.

Colonel Tobias Hume saw the pitiful mother weep and pull the wisps of her grey hair. He also heard her lamentation to the extended sleeves of snow and embroidered linen high above the grave:

"They made him fight with the sword, and the little falcon was not born to fight. He never killed a man, my Dmitri, and the villains who go to war butchered him because he wouldn't kill. No, he wouldn't kill anyone, my little falcon."

EPILOGUE

BY COLONEL TOBIAS HUME

TO the Right Honovrable The Lords and Others Assembled in the High Court of Parliament. The humble Petition of Tobias Hume, one of the poore brethren of that famous Foundation of the Charter House.

Right Honourable and Noble Lords,

I doe humbly intreat to know why your Lordships doe slight me, as if I were a foole or an Asse: I tell you truely I have been abused to your Lordships by some base fellowes; but if I did know them, I would make them repent it, were they never so great men in your sight; for I can doe the Kings Majesty and my Countrey better service then the best Souldier or Colonel in this Land, or in all Christendom, which now it is a great wonder unto me, that your Lordships doe suffer so many unskilfull Souldiers to goe over for Ireland, to doe the Kings Majesties service, that are not able to lead a Company, neither doe they know what belongs to a Souldier; and yet for all this, your Lordships leave me out, that am able to doe the Kings Majesty better service then all the Souldiers that are now to be sent over for Ireland: So that if your Lordships please to pay for the making of a hundred or sixe score Instruments of war, which I am to have along with me, if you please to send me for Ireland, and make me Commander of all those men that are now to goe over for Ireland, I will undertake to get in all Ireland in three or foure Months at the farthest, or else if I doe it not, I will give them leave to take off my head, if my Commanders will bee as forward as my

selfe, and yet I will doe all things with great discretion. . . .

But if you will not give me the command of all the souldiers that goe for Ireland at this time, I will not goe for Ireland, but I will goe for another Countrey, where I will have a greater command then all this which I have desired from your Lordships. But I yet live in hope that you will be pleased to beleeeve me, and helpe me that live in great misery, by reason that I have maintained a thousand Souldiers in this City to do the King service in Ireland, and this I have done seven weekes together, which hath made me very poore, so that I have pawned all my best cloathes, and have now no good garment to weare.

And therefore I humbly beseech you all Noble Lords, that you will not suffer me to perish for want of food, for I have not one penny to helpe me at this time to buy me bread, so that I am like to be starved for want of meat and drinke, and did walke into the fields very lately to gather Snailles in the nettles, and brought a bagge of them home to eat, and doe now feed on them for want of other meate, to the great shame of this land. . . .

I will undertake to fetch his Majesty home twenty millions of gold and silver in ready coine in the space of twelve or fourteene weecks: If this service bee not worthy of meat and drink, judge you that are grave and wise Lores of the Parliament, for I will make no more Petitions unto your Lordships, for I have made many, but have not got any answer of them, and therefore if your Lordships will neither entertaine me, nor give me money to buy me meat and drinke, I will goe with as much speed as I can into other Countries, rather then I will be starved here. For I protest I cannot endure this misery any longer, for it is worse to mee then when I did eat horse flesh, and bread made of the barke of trees, mingled with hay dust, and this

was in Parno in List-land, when we were beleagured by the Polonians: but now to proceed further, I have offered to shew your Lordships my instruments of war, and many other things which I can do fit for the wars, and yet other base fellowes are set forward before me that cannot do the Kings Majesty that great service which I can do him, and therefore I say it is a great shame to al this land. . . .

I am an old experienced Souldier, and have done great service in other forraine Countries, as when I was in Russia, I did put thirty thousand to flight, and killed six or seven thousand Polonians by the art of my instruments of warre when I first invented them, and did that great service for the Emperor of Russia. . . .

And so I humbly take my leave of your Lordships, being very desirous to speake with all the Lords of the Parliament, if they will vouchsafe to speake with me before I goe out of this Land, for I am not able to endure this misery any longer, for I want money, meate and drinke and cloaths, and therefore I pray your Lordships to pardon my boldnesse, and helpe me with some reliefe if you please, or else I must of necessity goe into other Countries presently, and so I most humbly take my leave for this time, and rest

Your Lordships most humble servant to do your
Honours all the good service I can, for I have
many excellent qualities I give God thanks
for it.

TOBIAS HUME COLONELL.

From: The True Petition of Colonel Hume, As it was presented to the Lords assembled in the high Court of Parliament: Being then one of the poore Brethren of that famous Foundation of the Charter House.

London, Printed for Iohn Giles, 1642.

(continued from front flap)

Tobias Hume was a real person, a mercenary soldier, a musician who played the viol da gamba, an inventor who dreamt of new instruments of destruction. In this novel he constructs his Great Machine amidst the vapours of the Pripet Marshes. All that remains of him are two books of musical compositions, published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and a weird petition to Parliament, quoted in *Loot and Loyalty* as an epilogue. This petition reveals an afflicted state of mind and from it the author has imagined a career for Tobias Hume which is not only typical of the seventeenth century, but seems strangely relevant to our times. His problem is, in fact, that of a displaced person in reverse: an exiled Scotsman in Eastern Europe.

Also by Jerzy Pietrkiewicz

THE KNOTTED CORD

"... an unusual work . . . episodic, and, in effect autobiographical narrative of a childhood in north-west Poland in the twenties. The piety, the superstitions, the rigid customs, the tenacity and passions of the people, all are seen with the intense yet truthful eye of childhood."

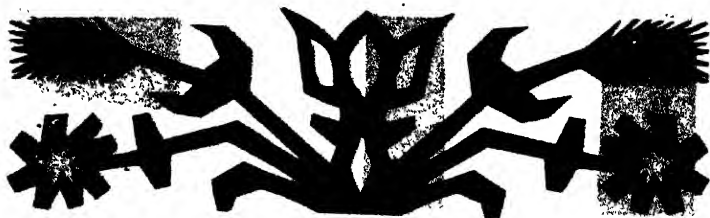
The Observer

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"*The Knotted Cord* is a poet's novel, the author of which is to be congratulated upon his treatment of the English language."

Times Literary Supplement



Captaine Humes Musically
The Souldiers Song



 Sing the praise of honor'd wars, the glory of
thickets, of lufy harts & famous fields: For that Musick worth the care of loue, a fight for kings, &
Oh the Soldiers loue: Look, & me thinks I
See the grace of chivalry, the colours are displaid, the captaines bright araid: See now the banners rais'd,

